Episode Book

EPISODE #5645

Who Teaches You to Fix Your Own Home?

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SYNOPSIS

Most people who can fix things learned reactively, project by project — which leaves odd gaps: you can wire a plug but not sand a board. This episode digs into why those gaps are structural, not personal, tracing them back to the 1983 "A Nation at Risk" report and forty years of funding that starved shop classes while academic programs grew 153%. It surveys what actually exists today — community college home-repair courses, folk school weekend bootcamps, Habitat for Humanity's HomeLab launching this fall in Waterloo — and asks why hands-on repair got decoupled from "life skills," which now means budgeting and resumes. Then it gets concrete: what would a basic skill set actually include, and could schools teach drilling and choosing an anchor the way they teach reading?

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

Daniel's been doing a lot of DIY lately. Wiring plug runs today, cutting wood yesterday, all of it tied to moving apartment. The move cost a fortune, so if he wants the place set up nicely, his hands are the only crew he can afford.



Corn

And here's what he wrote in this week. He grew up knowing how to do things. Wiring a plug, building computers. But he still feels like a klutz in some respects. Never welded metal. Ask him to sand something and he'd be lost. What he does know has been useful, though he can't remember when or how he learned it. It just stayed dormant.



Corn

The idea he's been toying with is a DIY course for anyone who wants to take care of the basics around the house. His read is that most people who develop these skills end up with a set like his. Useful, but with odd gaps around things they never had a project for.



Corn

Then the thesis. This knowledge is deeply empowering, and being able to fix things and shape your own space is vital in an era where so many people rent. It should be decoupled from the framework of hobbies. The way schools teach reading and literacy, they should teach drilling, choosing an anchor, wiring a plug, and working with electricity safely.



Corn

Two questions at the end. Has anyone attempted a DIY workshop, or integrated it into high school education? And how would you structure a basic set of skills?



Herman

That second question is the whole episode, really. Because the moment you try to write the syllabus, you find out you don't agree on what the subject even is.



Corn

So let's start with the gaps themselves. Daniel's intuition that they're structural rather than personal turns out to be exactly right.



Herman

The organizing distinction here is hobby versus life skill. Hobby framing says these are optional enrichment. You pick them up if you're into that sort of thing. Life-skill framing says they're baseline competence, the same category as reading.



Corn

And that's not a nostalgia argument. This is live right now.



Herman

Very live. School districts are spending tens of millions of dollars to expand and revamp shop classes. The Wall Street Journal's framing is that hands-on skills are a hedge against the AI future. The New York Times ran a student opinion piece and an opinion column in October of twenty twenty-three, both asking whether shop and home ec should come back.



Corn

Demand side is not ambiguous either. A NORC survey of over six thousand voters found ninety-five percent want more skilled-trades options in high school. Eighty-four percent support more government funding for it.



Herman

And voters rank skilled trades as the top elective funding priority. Ahead of STEM, ahead of business, ahead of healthcare, arts, phys ed.



Corn

Which tells you the public has already decided this matters. The interesting part is what they think it's for.



Herman

Right, and that's the tension we should keep separate all episode. Most of that revival energy is about careers. Electricians for data centers, welders for construction. Daniel's proposal is about fixing your own space. Those overlap, but they are not the same goal, and a course could serve one and completely ignore the other.



Corn

So the arc: why the gaps exist and why they're structural. What actually exists today and why it's fragmented. Then what a real curriculum would look like.



Herman

To understand why the gaps exist, we have to go back to 1983. Because this wasn't an accident.



Corn

Nineteen eighty-three. A Nation at Risk.



Herman

That report is the hinge. It reframed American schooling around college preparation, and the funding followed the framing. Here's the number that makes it concrete. The share of US high school graduates concentrating in occupational education fell from thirty-three point seven percent in 1982 to twenty-seven point eight percent by 1990.



Corn

Eight years, six points.



Herman

And then the money did the rest. Between fiscal eighty-five and fiscal twenty fourteen, Congress grew funding for academic programs by a hundred and fifty-three percent. Over the same stretch, the Perkins Act, which is the main federal career and technical funding stream, stayed roughly flat. Inflation ate about a third of its value.



Corn

So you don't need a conspiracy. You just need one stream growing and the other one standing still, and within a generation the shop wing is a storage room.



Herman

That's the mechanism. It wasn't students losing interest. It was policy choosing a direction and funding it.



Corn

And the bill for that choice came due.



Herman

One point eight trillion dollars in student debt, borrowed to send a generation to four-year colleges. Meanwhile eighty-one thousand electrician openings are projected every year through twenty thirty-four. The share of construction workers aged fifty-five and over went from eleven point five percent in 2003 to twenty-two point seven percent by 2020.



Corn

Every electrician who retired without a replacement left a job no college graduate can do.



Herman

That's the line that should be on a poster somewhere. And it's the career side. Now bring it back to Daniel's actual problem.



Corn

His actual problem is that he can wire a plug and he can't sand.



Herman

And that pattern is not a personal failing. It's how the knowledge transmits now. People learn this stuff reactively, project by project. You learn to wire a plug because you needed to wire a plug. You learn to hang a shelf because the shelf was in your hand and the wall was in front of you.



Corn

Which produces competence with holes in it. Exactly the shape Daniel describes.



Herman

There's a piece in Forbes from February of last year that frames the broader version. Graduates, quote, possess theoretical knowledge but little practical application. Stressed and unprepared for the realities of adulthood.



Corn

That's the same complaint, one register up. The gaps aren't in the hands, they're in the pipeline.



Herman

And here's the part I find sad. Daniel says he grew up knowing how to do things, and he can't remember when or how he learned it. That's not just his memory being fuzzy. That's what transmission looks like when it works. You absorb it sideways, from a parent, a neighbor, a shop teacher, and it never announces itself as education.



Corn

So when the shop teacher retires and nobody replaces him, the transmission stops and nobody notices for twenty years.



Herman

Right. The gaps are generational. They're also classed, in the sense that the households that kept transmitting hands-on knowledge kept it, and the ones that depended on the school to do it lost it. Daniel got lucky on the home side and still has holes. Imagine starting from zero.



Corn

So he's not describing a quirk. He's describing the median outcome of a policy that ran for forty years.



Herman

And you can see the decoupling in the present tense if you look at what we actually teach adults. Search for an adulting course.



Corn

I did. That was a depressing afternoon.



Herman

What did you find?



Corn

Budgeting. Taxes. Resumes. Meal prep, laundry, car maintenance, a thing called a Life Binder. Hands-on repair is one module, or absent entirely.



Herman

So the culture has decided that life skills means financial admin.



Corn

Which is useful. I'm not knocking a Life Binder. But you can balance a budget perfectly and still not know what's behind your drywall.



Herman

That's the gap Daniel's course would fill. Practical skills got decoupled from life-skills curricula, and nobody noticed because the phrase sounds covered.



Corn

So the gaps are structural. But has anyone actually tried to fix them?



Herman

Yes. The answer is yes, and the answer is also that it's fragmented in a way that proves the point.



Corn

Fragmented how?



Herman

Start with community colleges, because that's where the formal stuff lives. Johnson County Community College runs Basic Home Repair 101, covering electrical, plumbing, HVAC, and structural systems, with guided projects. Seattle Central has a basic hands-on home repair and maintenance course. Pembrokeshire College in the UK runs a nine-week Home Maintenance for Beginners that leads to a City and Guilds Level One Award in Construction Skills.



Corn

Nine weeks and a qualification. That's a real course.



Herman

Then you drop a tier to folk schools. Deep River Folk School runs a three-day Home Maintenance Bootcamp. The Common Knowledge Centre does a weekend DIY for Beginners. Sydney Community College has a two-day Home DIY Basics. There's an Irish School of DIY doing a one-day beginner course.



Corn

Weekend formats. Which tells you who they think the customer is.



Herman

A person with a free Saturday and a curiosity. Not a person who needs a skill to live.



Corn

And the biggest institutional player?



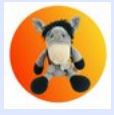
Herman

Habitat for Humanity, by a distance. Home-maintenance classes across a lot of chapters. Kent County in Michigan runs them free, at a completed Habitat house. Springfield, Missouri has one called Tools for Life. Saginaw charges twenty-five dollars. La Crosse does drywall repair with individual practice boards, which I love, because you actually get your own board to ruin.



Corn

That's the right instinct. Let people make their mistakes on scrap.



Herman

And then yesterday, literally yesterday, Iowa Heartland Habitat announced a new space called HomeLab, in Waterloo. First classes this fall. Twenty-five dollars a class.



Corn

Yesterday.



Herman

The timing is almost rude. And it's the most explicitly curriculum-structured thing I found. Seven modules. Basic tools and safety. Exterior maintenance. Bathroom and laundry. Yard upkeep. Mechanical room and home systems. Kitchen and appliances. Interior finishes.



Corn

That's a sequence, not a menu.



Herman

And completers get a free resource binder. Which is a small detail that tells you they expect people to keep going after the class ends.



Corn

Who's it open to?



Herman

Current and future homeowners. Which explicitly includes renters. That's unusual, and it matters for Daniel's point.



Corn

Because most of the others aren't.



Herman

Most of the others are framed around homeowners. Kent, Pensacola, a lot of the Habitat programs. The renting angle is under-served across the whole landscape, which is strange given how many people rent.



Corn

So the answer to Daniel's first question is yes, people have attempted this. Repeatedly. It's just scattered across community colleges, folk schools, Habitat chapters, libraries, and municipal rec programs.



Herman

Durham County Library has a Home Fundamentals session with a home repair lab. Milliken, Colorado runs a monthly series for young adults where one session is Using Basic Tools and you build a birdhouse.



Corn

A birdhouse is a perfect first project, by the way. Cheap, small, and if you botch it the bird doesn't complain.



Herman

There's no equivalent of a common literacy standard. Every program sets its own scope, its own fee, its own idea of what basic means.



Corn

Now the high school question, because that's the half of Daniel's prompt that's actually contested.



Herman

Contested and reviving. Wisconsin is the concrete case. Technical-education teachers there are overhauling shop curricula, and enrollment in hands-on courses is rising. The state lists trades among its hottest jobs.



Corn

And the demand is there in the student body.



Herman

Ninety-five percent of voters say more skilled-trades study would better prepare students. But here's the gap between wanting and getting. Roughly one-third of students who want a trades class can't take one. Only thirty percent of high schoolers have taken one.



Corn

So a third of the interested kids are turned away.



Herman

And the students who do get in notice the difference. Fifty-nine percent of students who took a trades class say school is useful for life after high school. Among those who didn't, it's thirty-eight.



Corn

Twenty-one points. That's not a rounding error.



Herman

That's a different relationship with the institution.



Corn

Now, the justification being used to sell the revival is new, and I want to poke at it.



Herman

The AI framing.



Corn

The Journal's line is that hands-on skills are a hedge against the AI future. And the Harbor Freight survey found forty-nine percent of parents fear AI will reduce their child's job prospects.



Herman

It's a distinct rhetorical engine from the old college-for-all backlash. And it works politically, because it converts a values argument into a risk argument.



Corn

But does it serve what Daniel actually cares about?



Herman

That's the question. If the goal is a job, the AI-resilience pitch is fine. If the goal is self-sufficiency, the AI pitch is a sales tactic that happens to point the same direction. The kid who learns to wire a plug because he's scared of robots is not the same kid as the one who learns because it's his apartment.



Corn

And the funding follows the pitch. Money shows up for workforce pipelines. It doesn't show up as reliably for a guy who wants to hang a shelf.



Herman

Which is why the provision we do have sits in the hobby bucket. Community ed, folk schools, weekend workshops. The framing is leisure, and the pricing and scheduling follow the framing.



Corn

So if you were going to build Daniel's course, what would you actually borrow?



Herman

The HomeLab seven-module sequence is the most concrete existing template. Tools and safety first, then exterior, then the wet rooms, then yard, then mechanical systems, then kitchen and appliances, then interior finishes.



Corn

That's organized by area of the home.



Herman

It is. And it's a good structure. But notice what's missing from every program I looked at. None of them teaches choosing an anchor as a standalone competency.



Corn

Nobody teaches the decision.



Herman

Nobody teaches it as a decision. It shows up as a step inside a project, if at all. And none of them treat electrical safety as a literacy. They treat it as a trade skill, which means you either apprentice or you don't learn it.



Corn

So the existing courses teach you to maintain a house. They don't teach you to think about materials.



Herman

Which brings us to the structural question Daniel's course has to answer before it can be written. Is it a career pipeline, a homeowner maintenance program, or a life-skills literacy?



Corn

Three different courses.



Herman

Three different courses, three different funding sources, three different definitions of success. A career pipeline is judged on placement. A maintenance program is judged on whether your gutters got cleaned. A literacy is judged on whether you can walk into a hardware store and not be afraid.



Corn

I've been in a lot of hardware stores. The fear is real.



Herman

The fear is the whole thing. That's what Daniel's describing when he says he feels like a klutz. It's not the sanding. It's standing in front of the sanding and not knowing where to start.



Corn

I want to put a pin in that, because I think it's the actual subject of the episode.



Herman

Hold the pin. I think someone at the desk wants to say something about anchors.



Hilbert

Drywall anchors in plaster.



Corn

Go on.



Hilbert

That's the one. You can't put a drywall anchor in plaster. It doesn't grab. Plaster is too brittle, it crumbles around the threads, and the whole thing pulls out the first time somebody leans on the shelf.



Herman

So what do you use?



Hilbert

You use a toggle. The kind with the little wings that fold flat, you push it through the hole, and it springs open behind the wall. Then you tighten it and the wings pull against the back of the plasterboard. The sound it makes when it fails is a soft pop, and then everything is on the floor.



Corn

You've heard the pop.



Hilbert

I've heard the pop. I've also heard the other one, which is worse. That's the plastic sleeve in brick. Somebody drills a hole, taps in a plastic sleeve, drives a screw, and it feels tight. It is not tight. It's the sleeve gripping dust.



Herman

What's the failure mode there?



Hilbert

There's no failure pattern. There's a delay. It holds for a year and then it doesn't. And by then the person has forgotten they ever doubted it, which is why they hang something heavier on it.



Corn

That's the trap. The confidence compounds before the evidence arrives.



Hilbert

Everyone wants to do the electricity because it's exciting. But the first thing you'll actually need is to hang a shelf. And if you get that wrong, you'll never trust yourself to try the wiring.



Herman

Say that again, because I think that's the answer to the second half of Daniel's question.



Hilbert

The anchor is the gateway. It's small, it's cheap, and if you get it wrong nothing catches fire. But it teaches you the one thing you need before anything else, which is that the wall is a material with opinions. Once you know that, the wiring stops being scary. It's just a different material.



Corn

The sequence should be psychological, not technical.



Hilbert

Start with what builds trust. The rest is just steps.



Corn

Which means the seven-module home sequence is right about coverage and wrong about order.



Herman

It's organized by room. It should be organized by confidence.



Hilbert

I had a job once where the whole thing was hanging things. Four years. I got very good at it, and nobody ever asked me about it, because it's not the kind of thing that shows up on a resume. But I could tell you what's behind any wall in that building.



Corn

Four years of hanging things.



Hilbert

It's the work. Somebody has to do the work.



Corn

I keep thinking about the phrase Daniel used. He said the knowledge stayed dormant. Like it was in storage and he just went and got it.



Herman

That's the transmission working. It went in sideways, without a label, and it waited.



Corn

Which is the argument for teaching it in school, actually. Not because school is where you learn to hang a shelf, but because school is the last place where everybody is in the same room.



Herman

That's the literacy case in one line. You don't teach reading because every child will become a novelist. You teach it because you can't participate without it.



Corn

The physical world is the same kind of thing. You can't participate in your own apartment without some minimum.



Herman

The research found no single standardized DIY curriculum anywhere. Provision is fragmented across community colleges, folk schools, Habitat chapters, libraries, municipal rec programs. Every one of them sets its own scope.



Corn

Is that fragmentation a problem to solve, or a feature?



Herman

I don't know. A national standard would be slow and would probably get captured by whichever lobby shows up first. But the fragmentation means the only people who find these courses are the people who already went looking.



Corn

Which is the same reactive pattern, one level up. You find the course because you already had the problem.



Herman

The trades revival is largely about jobs. Electricians for data centers. Welders for construction. Daniel's proposal is about self-sufficiency. A course could serve one and completely ignore the other.



Corn

Which one does the moment actually need?



Herman

Both, probably. But they need different things from a classroom. A career pipeline needs equipment and industry partners. A literacy needs a bench and a Saturday and somebody patient standing next to you.



Corn

The AI framing is now carrying the revival. Hands-on skills as a hedge against automation.



Herman

If the goal is employment, that argument is doing real work. If the goal is empowerment, it's a distraction. The real case for teaching everyone to wire a plug and choose an anchor is simpler than that.



Corn

It's your space. You should be able to shape it.



Herman

That's the whole thing. And it doesn't need a robot to justify it.



Corn

One detail that didn't make the main thread, and I think it's the most interesting thing we found.



Herman

Go.



Corn

Students who took a trades class were twenty-one points more likely to say school is useful for life after high school. Fifty-nine against thirty-eight.



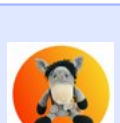
Herman

We treated that as a footnote.



Corn

We treated it as a footnote. But it's the strongest number in the whole pile. It's not about jobs, and it's not about AI. It's about whether young people believe the institution is on their side.



Herman

That's the cutting-room floor, then. That's the one to keep.



Corn

The open question I'm left with. If DIY skills were treated as literacy rather than hobby, what would the standard actually be, and who would set it? Nobody has. There's no DIY equivalent of a reading level.



Herman

The second one. The trades revival is about jobs. Daniel's proposal is about self-sufficiency. Those overlap but they aren't the same goal, and a course could serve one and not the other.



Corn

Hilbert's point is the one I keep coming back to. The sequence should be psychological. Start with what builds trust, because the goal isn't knowledge. It's the self-trust to try.



Herman

The rest is just steps.



Corn

That's the episode. Thanks to our producer, Hilbert Flumingtop.



Herman

This has been My Weird Prompts. If you want more conversations like this one, where a listener's question turns into a real investigation, subscribe at my weird prompts dot com or in your podcast app.



Corn

Send your own prompts. We read all of them.



Herman

We'll be back soon.