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Killing Ideas Softly?: The Promise and Perils of Creativity in the Classroom

reviewed by Christine C. Pappas — October 23, 2015

Title: Killing Ideas Softly?: The Promise and Perils of Creativity in the Classroom
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According to Beghetto, there are three major perspectives for including creativity in the classroom. The first is the "radical change" view that requires entirely rethinking the goals of the K–12 curriculum and the ways in which teachers teach. The second approach, the "additive change," incorporates "extra" or "new" creativity activities to the current curriculum. Finally, the third perspective, which the author argues for and illustrates in this book, is the "slight change" one. More specifically, the goal of the book is to show that teachers do not have to make radical changes in their present academic responsibilities to incorporate creativity in their classrooms; instead, "teachers [can] develop an understanding of the role of creativity in the classroom, common challenges that get in the way of including creativity in one's classroom, and practical insights for addressing those challenges in the context of one's everyday teaching" (p. xii).

The book provides a thorough synthesis of the theory and research on creativity and how it might be realized in the classroom. This includes both the promises and perils involved that the second part of Beghetto's book title suggests. The first part of the title is problematic, for he is asking teachers to "kill ideas softly." He argues that teachers should look for unscripted micromoments where students initiate their own ideas rather than have them dismiss unexpected student responses. This requires teachers to look at fleeting classroom events with what he calls "the eye of Monet"—noticing and capitalizing on these surprising micromoments, as they serve as opportunities for student creative expression. These are not what he calls "Big-C creativity," which represents the "revolutionary contributions of creative geniuses" (p. 11), but the "little-c" or "mini-c" categories of creativity that are manifested when students offer their own novel personal interpretations of experiences or events.

In order to see this type of student creativity in these micromoments of the classroom, teachers have to re-examine the typical talk of the classroom: the I (teacher *Initiate*), R (student *Response*), E (teacher *Evaluate*) structure, where teachers control the classroom discourse. Allowing for mini-c student ideas involves going beyond the expected correct answers of the IRE model. In doing so, teachers can see how creativity can be viewed as important for teaching the academic subject. Creativity relies on prior knowledge and experience, which means that both learning and creativity involve a constructive process. Central to mini-c creativity is the process of *constructing* personal, meaningful knowledge and understanding in a social cultural context of academic subject teaching and learning.

So far, the *promises* of enacting creativity in the classroom have been emphasized. However, Beghetto argues that there are also many perils involved. Many of these perils rest on longstanding assumptions about the nature of the educated mind. These are inherited beliefs that the role of the teacher is to deliver "ready-made knowledge" (p. 72) to students. Such a perspective has led to the IRE talk structure discussed above, which Cazden (2001) terms as the "default," where teachers have to take different, explicit actions if they want to avoid it. When teachers attempt such changes, students are likely to resist because they may not believe that they can really offer ideas different from the ones the teacher is looking for. So, how do teachers help students see a different way of enacting curricular activities? What happens if students do deviate from the default teacher-controlled plan of instruction? What does a teacher do when a student offers an unexpected and novel idea? Do teachers see such remarks as "off-track," or do they see them as mini-c contributions to be sustained and developed by teachers? Of course, as Beghetto suggests, not all mini-c events can be further investigated by teachers—they have to worry about time constraints, the ongoing curricular mandates they face, and potential confusion stemming from these instances of creativity. Thus, although he argues strongly about the critical importance and possibility of including creativity in everyday teaching, Beghetto is honest about the challenges that teachers encounter in pulling it off.

Beghetto helps teachers enact creativity in their curriculum by providing many practical ideas as well as relevant theory and research. One drawback of the book, however, is that many of the classroom examples are specifically for math, perhaps because of the unwarranted, but commonly viewed "only correct answer" nature of the subject. There are a few on teaching reading comprehension, but surprisingly few on science, and none on social studies or writing. Nonetheless, teachers of various academic areas may still find this book practical and inspiring.

By teaching for and with creativity, teachers are rethinking the underlying *power* relations in the classroom. They are

reconsidering whether everything taken up and considered in the classroom should be controlled by them, or if this teacher privilege should also be shared with students. In doing so, they provide spaces for students to initiate and offer their own ideas, comments, and questions. Such mini-c creativity contributions become appreciated and developed as part of the academic content of the classroom, which is especially important as our classrooms are more populated by ethno-linguistically diverse students.

It is important to note that there is other research that has similar goals in altering teacher-student relations in the classroom but is not discussed or referred to in terms of "creativity" per se. For example, the work on dialogism and dialogic inquiry (Nystrand, 1997; Nystrand, Wu, Gamoran, Zeiser, & Long, 2003; Wells, 1999) promotes creativity by inviting the voices of students in instructional events. Certain teacher strategies, such as "revoicing" (O'Connor & Michaels, 1993), can alter the participation status of students by giving them opportunities to re-evaluate their ideas in safe ways. Leaving spaces for students to provide a range of intertextual connections also fosters changes in the sharing of power between teachers and students (Varelas & Pappas, 2006). Thus, readers may want to seek more ideas for transforming the power dynamics in teaching-learning events that are found in these and other "non-creativity" areas of research to complement the contributions Beghetto has offered in this book.

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