The July 2010 cover of Newsweek magazine had the ominous headline, “The Creativity Crisis” and included this byline, “For the first time, research shows that American creativity is declining” (Bronson & Merryman, 2010, p. 44). Most alarming is that there has been a significant decline on the Torrance Test of Creative Thinking in K-3. Part of this decline is due to teachers’ narrow views of creativity. Teachers often believe that creativity is limited to “that of the unreal and make-believe, of the myth and made up story” (Dewey, 1899/2007, p. 72).

Killing Ideas Softly is an understatement. Many school systems around the world destroy opportunities for creativity as teachers try to answer the question, “What will be asked on the tests?” In an attempt to meet curriculum standards, teachers are seemingly forced at times to make decisions concerning facts vs. creativity. Professor Jeffrey and Lisa Smith state that the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 “sucked all of the air out of the ruminations of educators who might embrace creativity in the United States” (2010, p. 252). In Killing Ideas Softly, Ronald Beghetto provides a case for
advocating creative moments into the existing curriculum of the school, rather than creating new content areas and new lessons that focus specifically on creativity, Beghetto suggests teachers find teachable moments during existing pre-planned lessons to foster creativity.

The author begins by posing the question, “What do you think creativity is?” at the beginning of the book. After a series of examples and non-examples, the author provides the following definition, “Anything that is determined to be both original and task appropriate as defined within a particular context” (p. 5).

In order to make sense of the creative differences between little insights in the classroom that can take place on a daily basis and those that are characterized by people who have claimed an expertise in their field, the author provides a hierarchy of creativity that begins with the mini-c and ends with the Big-C. An understanding of this hierarchy is essential to comprehending the premise of the book.

Mini-c is any “novel and personally meaningful interpretation of experiences, actions, and events” (p. 10). The example of a cooking activity in which the student has insight into combining ingredients, textures and flavors to make a predetermined recipe is an example of a mini-c in creativity. Little-c moments are best described as creative experiences and expressions of everyday life. For example a little-c is the culinary hobbyist who takes on cooking and begins to create new recipes or nuances of existing recipes to his/her delight.

A Pro-C is a professional chef who cooks for a living and teaches cooking classes. Finally, the Big-C is the clear cut examples of creative expression. Examples of these include the work of a Master Chef or people such as Julia Childs or Gordon Ramsay. The distinction between the mini-c, the little-c, the Pro-C, and is the Big-C necessary because creativity in the classroom does not have to be on par with the work of legendary creators, but instead can be viewed as opportunities for a mini-c to take place on a daily lesson-by-lesson basis.
In Chapter 2 the author begins with a definition of micro-moments that take place in the classroom. Micro-moments are brief, surprising moments of creative potential that emerge in everyday routines, habits and planned experiences. In these micro-moments, the students break from the normal set of responses to curricular expression and look at the mundane through a new set of eyes. The moments of creative expression called the “eye of Monet” occur in the classroom throughout the day when the planned curriculum meets curriculum as lived out in the context of the micro-moments (p. 18). The importance of teacher flexibility and experience are then described as necessary components for being able to deal effectively with the micro-moments.

Creative ideas occur when expected ideas are made meaningful in the context of everyday instruction. Often because of the necessity for “getting through the curriculum” teachers provide soft dismissals in response to teachable moments. “Let’s move on to the next item. We will come back to that idea at the end” is a soft dismissal that can squelch creativity. These dismissals can and do hamper the micro-moment opportunities for students to have mini-c experiences during the everyday instructional plans.

Creativity requires taking charge of one’s own learning. Mary Warnock, a British philosopher of education says the cultivating of creative imagination should be viewed as the “chief aim of education” (Warnock, 1978, p. 9). The mini-c moments require prior knowledge to construct new knowledge. Students develop their own personal knowledge through constructivism, the process of learning that draws on guidance and support from the teacher. It is notable that creativity and learning are subject matter specific. The teacher does not have to deviate from the regular curriculum in order to provide opportunities for students to express themselves creatively. Instruction should provide enough flexibility to encourage students to be self-directing in their acquisition of knowledge. This flexibility should not occur only during “creative lessons” or in the arts but instead should be infused throughout the day in the regular curriculum.
Students need to use their metacognitive abilities to take control of their own learning. These abilities allow students to express themselves in mini-c opportunities.

Teachers see little connection to that which occurs on a daily basis in the classroom to fostering creativity. Although often suppressed in classrooms and schools, creativity cannot die. All too often creativity competes for instructional time with the established curriculum. This is unfortunate because, as the author points out, they should complement each other. The truth is that as we acquire facts we are able to think more creatively. Facts are necessary, but not the end. Facts are requisite knowledge for creative thinking. There are several roadblocks to creativity in the classroom. These include, 1) historical separation of creativity from learning, 2) external pressures put on teachers to cover the material in the designated curriculum, and 3) inherited teaching practices (teachers tend to teach the way they have been taught).

The average classroom day is riddled with soft dismissals and other inherited patterns of classroom talk that impede creativity. Teachers are armed with teacher talk. This is defined as initiate, respond and evaluate. There is little time or room for opportunities to pursue mini-c moments in the day. One contributor to the lack of opportunities for mini-c expression is the pursuit of conceptual conformity rather than developing students’ creative capacity. Dismissals of creative ideas discourage students from investing intellectual energy on their learning. They know that the teacher has the right answer and that is what will be expected of them. There is little to no reward at times for creatively engaging in content. Because of the desire to cover content in rapid fire, teachers often lose focus on what is happening in the moment. Teachers who reinforce creativity focus on orchestrating subject-matter-rich opportunities for students to develop personal understandings that are compatible with existing knowledge. This leaves room for the encouragement and exploration of students’ mini-c understanding of the academic subject matter being taught.
Creative mortification is defined as the indefinite suspension of creative potential. As pointed out earlier, creativity does not die, only one’s creative will. Early in life children experience mini-cs that can become little-cs and after many years of work have the possibility of becoming Big-Cs. One example of a mini-c becoming a Big-C is through the genuine feedback that Oscar Hammerstein provided to Stephen Sondheim. “Hammerstein provided detailed, improvement focused feedback on how the songs were structured, the rhyme and scene construction and how the characters evolved and also pointed out inconsistencies” (p. 97). Hammerstein’s honest and clear feedback guided Sondheim to become one of the premiere composers for Broadway musicals. Sondheim embraced the feedback that Hammerstein provided. Mortification kills the opportunities for creativity in the classroom. One type of mortification is to avoid opportunities to give students feedback. The way students subjectively interpret feedback determines whether feedback leads to mortification. The manner in which feedback is given can lead to mortification. Praise, generally considered positive if used improperly, unfocused and non-specific, can lead to mortification. Educators play a key role in helping to make potential moments of mortification into experiences of edification. Teachers often play intellectual hide and seek – I have the answer and your job is to figure it out. The use of external motivators can guide students away from the much more powerful intrinsic motivators. External rewards can have a negative impact on creativity. Often teachers will reward quick completion of tasks over the quality of responses. While often misused, external motivators are not bad if used cautiously. Teachers who use external motivators wisely provide a rationale to students for their use. External motivators cannot take the place of internal motivators that will enhance children’s opportunities for creative expression.

The integration of creativity into the classroom may seem daunting, but the reality is that creativity can and should be integrated into the
everyday curriculum. Instead of adding more to the curriculum, slight changes to infuse instruction that supports creativity need to occur. The author provides a list of items in review of the teachings and research on creativity: 1) all students have the capacity for mini-c moments in the classroom, 2) teaching for creativity requires inclusion of creativity in the classroom, 3) use steps (included in the book) for incorporating creativity into the everyday lesson plans, 4) make modifications to the text in order to integrate synthesis moments into the everyday classroom instruction, and 5) develop rubrics for providing feedback concerning creative expression. Some cautions for providing opportunities for creative expression in the classroom include, 1) don’t lose sight of making lessons fixed and teacher directed, 2) know when to intervene during the flow of students’ responses to keep from creating confusion and 3) plan lessons with the flexibility in mind that leads to opportunities for little-c moments.

Beghetto’s book is a must read for pre-service teachers. The book should be used in methods courses to provide candidates with a rich understanding of how meeting the curriculum standards and providing instruction to meet those standards can include micro-moments when students have the opportunity to express themselves creatively. The book should be on the shelf of every classroom teacher who is eager to provide students the chance to flex their creative muscle to create mini-c experiences that have the opportunity to become little-c and then possibly Big-C moments. Our job as teachers is not to replace the question “Will it be on the test?” for facts are necessary, but instead give teachers the knowledge, skills and dispositions to infuse creative expression into the everyday experiences in the classroom. Administrators should view this book as required for all classroom teachers to provide the requisite knowledge of how to integrate moments of creativity into what is often seen as the mundane classroom experience.
References


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