



[Matt:](#) Hello everybody, this is Matt and Laura Grundler. Welcome to another episode of the Creatively Connected Classroom. We have a great friend and guest with us today by the name of Christine Miller and ...

[Laura:](#) Really more than a friend, she's a part of our family.

[Matt:](#) We'll get into that. We'll get into that for sure.

[Laura:](#) Yeah, so excited to have her because it's really special to us to have her on the show.

[Matt:](#) Welcome, Christine. We'd love for you to kind of tell us your backstory and just kind of let our listeners know a little bit more about you.

[Christine:](#) Well, thank you Matt and Laura. This is super special to me as well on many levels. I am a lifetime fiber artist. I tell the story, which my husband laughs at, but it's true, when I was in third grade I was out on the playground at recess knitting with my back up against the school wall. That started everything, learned how to crochet and knit and sew and learned how to weave in college, and spent many years as a professional textile artist. reinventing the path to see where the success would come in. When I was about 50 I went into art education as a teacher. It seemed to knit all of my love for art together in a seamless kind of way. That's how I met you two, ended up in the same school district together. I just recently retired the end of last school year and now I'm really excited to be supervising future art teachers of America through the University of North Texas. It's been quite an interesting journey I've been on.

[Matt:](#) That's awesome.

[Laura:](#) Like you said, an interesting journey, but so many connections. You were integral in helping revamp our school district's curriculum and it coincided with you finishing your master's degree in art education and that curricular path. It's so interesting how it all just kind of fell together in this beautiful way. I mean, beyond the fiber arts you have a lot of expertise working with instructional pieces in education. I think right now you're working with pre-service teachers, correct?

[Christine:](#) That is correct.



[Laura:](#) Even though you've left the classroom, you have not left education by any means.

[Christine:](#) No, and I'm super happy to still be in art education, and especially at this time when we're trying to, across the country, bring in more 21st century skills and strategies so that our curriculum is more student-driven and more student-centered. I find that the most exciting part of working with pre-service teachers, to move them out of this idea that, "Oh, we're going to do this project. We're going to make a clay teapot," and really try to expand their vision into units of study and how those are going to break out into different learning activities so that you can really assess if they are learning the objectives that you wanted them to grow into. I think there's a lot of work to be done in our field and in every content area, bringing those creative ways, the creative classroom, to really ground into our students.

[Laura:](#) I think the ownership of their learning.

[Christine:](#) Yes, yes.

[Laura:](#) I think that that's really ... When we think about the creative classroom, and Matt you can chime in, but it's really about that. It's about giving kids opportunities in all content areas to master the standards, but then take ownership in a variety of ways of their own learning.

[Matt:](#) Well I think as art teachers, as any teacher, you hope to give them the skills and then once they have the skills, then you give them that freedom to kind of go in their own direction with those skills. It's not like they're just skipping past the skills, you know?

[Laura:](#) Right.

[Christine:](#) Right. I think for our youngest learners, I think they're probably firmly on the path, hopefully. I mean that's what we're trying to establish, because so many of our older learners are still used to that teacher-directed model. I think that's where the challenge comes in is the hook to get them excited about something to investigate on their own and not rely on their instructor.

[Matt:](#) On the teacher telling them, "This is what needs to happen next," or, "That's what needs to happen next."



[Christine:](#) Yeah.

[Laura:](#) You have this really cool website called Explore Fiber. What I like about it is that you show a lot of contemporary uses of fiber and not necessarily just in art form, but in everyday society. Can you tell us a little bit more about Explore Fiber and how that started?

[Christine:](#) Yeah. That actually came to my mind during my master's studies at Texas Woman's University. Before that I had gone to a conference by the Surface Design Association back in 2011. They gave scholarships to 10 teachers across the United States to attend the conference with the goal to bring more fiber into art ed curriculum. That kind of bubbled around in my head. Then when I started in my master's program I just thought, well, I just need to make a website and we need to have inspiration for teachers and some curriculum, but really presenting fibers as a fine art material. Then in our state, Texas, in 2013, the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills, our state standards, were reevaluated and adopted to include fibers in our program. That was super, super exciting to me. This is just my passion that people understand the importance of fibers. It's hard because they're so ubiquitous. I mean, Laura, you and I were talking about that very first experience as as a human being, we are wrapped and swaddled in cloth. That is a very deep sensory connection that we never leave. We sleep in cloth. We sit on cloth.

[Laura:](#) We wear cloth.

[Christine:](#) We wear cloth. It's everywhere.

[Laura:](#) We use cloth to clean our homes. [crosstalk 00:08:08] I had the privilege of riding in your new car yesterday and I was looking at the cloth on the seat because it was this really cool ... It had a great texture to it. It was varied and I thought, oh, that's such a neat pattern. It is really everywhere. Sometimes maybe people do overlook it.

[Christine:](#) They do, and not just from our lives, but culturally, gosh, every culture on the globe uses some sort of fiber technique, whether it's with grasses or twigs or yarn that they spin. Fiber processes are global. As you said, I like to focus on how those are really moving into the 21st century. For instance, I did a blog post once about a doctor who used a weaving technique idea to create a device that would go into a congenital heart. Some children have a hole in their heart. He can sort of insert this little woven thing and it expands open and seals up that



hole. There's science applications. There are architectural applications, nanotechnology. Fibers and nanotechnology are like hand and glove. Smart textiles and all the ways that we can manipulate and bring those things together are going to truly transform our lives in the 21st century.

[Laura:](#) Yeah. I think too, I mean ... I'm sorry to dominate this conversation. I also have a love of fiber, but it's from ... It's just different. I had the privilege of my middle school art teacher, Mrs. [Harjo 00:10:02], and she was Cherokee Indian and she brought a lot of her culture into our classroom and she taught me how to wet felt and she taught me how to do basket weaving and how to soak the reeds and all of these beautiful things. It's a nice ... What I love about fiber is that you can go into the 21st century, but you can also go back into culture and have these experiences that are really life-transforming. I mean honestly for me, some of those experiences with Mrs. Harjo, and even ... She was definitely more of a 3D teacher with us, but she also gave us a lot of choice.

[Laura:](#) I remember being in the eighth grade and working with ... We made this huge cactus to install at our local arts fair and we had to weave the metal together to make the sculpture. Just some of those things that I had learned the year before in basket weaving came into play in this sculpture. Just all of that experience over those two years with her really made me reflect on being an art teacher and why I wanted to be an art teacher. I still to this day dabble in fiber. I like to dabble in everything, but it's a comfort. It's kind of like when I'm having a hard time with something I can go back to fiber and it's kind of comforting to me.

[Christine:](#) Well I'm glad you bring that up because I think for our children that this is really important and I think teachers who bring fibers into their programs are finding that they ... First of all, they love it, love, love. Boys and girls, it just doesn't even matter. It calms them. Our children are so stressed and wound up and they don't have the kind of time that even we had, of quiet contemplative activity. It's really important. Even to have those ... I've had teachers tell me that to have that either before or after testing really helped the kids. I mean you guys, you were telling me about Owen and his knitting, that it really sort of grounds him.

[Matt:](#) Well, I think there is a lot of comfort, especially with children who have a learning challenge like Owen does, having ADD, having ADHD. When he was crocheting there was something calming but it was continuous. It was like that rhythm of just, okay, this is what I do, this is how it works. It was just kind of that rhythm, and that almost becomes comforting. Then there's a sense of



confidence that almost is built from that because once you see the product that's being made from that ... He ended up making a whole entire scarf that was about six feet long.

[Laura:](#) His first one was smaller and he realized it didn't really fit well. Then he got into Harry Potter and he had to have the Harry Potter scarf.

[Matt:](#) Then it had to be Harry Potter colors. It had to be Gryffindor colors. It was like six feet long and he was so proud of that. I think that's also something too, and it goes back to that whole thing that we talk about, that grit and that determination to work through it.

[Laura:](#) Yeah. Well, and I think the proud piece is you have this functional piece of art at the end. He's proud that he can wear this thing that he made and tell his friends, "I made this." He's confident in that. I think that that's part of the proud piece of it is that he can take it with him and use it.

[Christine:](#) Absolutely. Sometimes the discussion of craft versus art is ... I don't know. It just has so many different ...

[Laura:](#) Yeah.

[Matt:](#) It does. It does, because you have to legitimize it, I guess, in a way.

[Laura:](#) Which is sad sometimes, I think.

[Matt:](#) Well, I think for [crosstalk 00:14:22]-

[Christine:](#) Just getting back to that point of creation, an object that you can use and wear, and there is so much value in that. Laura, you and I were talking about my students. When I was ending at my career at my school, I had a full blown fiber studio in there. I had eight looms. This is something I want your listeners to kind of know because I've had people say, "Well how do you start? How do you get the stuff for that?" Really every community has fiber organizations. Those women and men have more stuff. They can win the we have the most stuff award. They usually are very generous in donating yarns and fabrics. I think one of the easy ways just to start down that path, if you don't have the budget to purchase material, is to contact those organizations and ask. Say, hey, I want to start something up. What do you have that you can help us out with?



- [Laura:](#) Well, and that's where social media also comes into play, because I follow other states' organizations, and Massachusetts Art Education Association two days ago posted that they had 80 looms to send out to Massachusetts art educators.
- [Christine:](#) What?
- [Laura:](#) I swear it was 80.
- [Christine:](#) Whoa.
- [Laura:](#) I was like, what? They were all different kinds of looms, all different sizes. They were trying to find them a home where they would be used. There are things out there, and like you said, there are weaving guilds. There are art guilds or fiber guilds. There are quilters.
- [Christine:](#) Oh yeah.
- [Laura:](#) I mean there are quilters.
- [Christine:](#) There are quilters, yeah.
- [Laura:](#) These are men and women that want to pass on this tradition.
- [Christine:](#) Absolutely.
- [Laura:](#) Yeah. There's so much out there. You can find them on Facebook. You can find them wherever or just go ... We have a local sewing store and you can walk into that store and find somebody. I was also, when we were just talking about Owen it made me think about, I don't know if you saw the post of the little kid. I think he was like six or seven. I've never seen anyone crochet so fast.
- [Christine:](#) Yeah, that little video has been cycling around Facebook recently and it's beautiful. He's just like a little house of fire with his crochet. It's great.
- [Susan:](#) Hey there, it's Susan from EducationCloset. Did you know that we have five online classes to help you meet your PD hour requirements? Each arts integration and STEAM course has been recently updated and is now worth 25 PD hours. Podcast listeners get a special discount. Just go to EducationCloset.com/courses, pick your course and enter the code "podcast" at checkout to get 15% off any course. Looking forward to seeing you in class soon. Now let's get back to the conversation.



Matt: Christine, you brought up earlier, by the end of your classroom teaching you had a full blown fiber arts studio. What kind of impact did you see on your students or on your campus maybe? What kind of impact, or was there an impact, and what kind was that that [crosstalk 00:17:58]?

Christine: Gosh, it was beautiful. I had my friends around the state donate looms and yarns and equipment and money to get smaller little looms. I taught teachers on the campus. I had students that would come back after their first project and do another. There was one student in particular, he hopped on the floor loom and, whoa. I mean, God, he was a weaver. I was so excited. He just took to it like a duck in the water and he wove like four yards of fabric. Then I helped him design a jacket and he sewed it, we got the sewing machine out and he did all the sewing and later entered that into an art competition and won first place.

Matt: Wow.

Christine: The pride that he had for that and the heart singing on my side was really, really strong and powerful. People are very fascinated with textiles. I think it's an easy entry, unlike some ... I mean, yeah, you can hand build with clay, but you still have to fire it. With textiles, yarns, I mean ... Matt, you were just talking to me about teaching your kids how to do finger knitting.

Matt: Yeah. I had to go onto YouTube to see a little how-to video and I still didn't quite totally have it down enough to be able to really explain it to my kids, but I had a couple of kids in the class that kind of knew as well and so we all kind of learned together. We all failed together that first day. Then the next day I had twice as many kids that were successful with it and they were like, "Oh, hey look, I did it."

Laura: You're finger knitting, but what are you going to turn that into?

Matt: We're using how that fiber can be used with yarn bombing. We're going to figure out, because it's a small class, it's a 3D class, and so what we're going to do is figure out how to use that, walk around the school with iPads and take pictures of different places around the school that they might be interested in yarn bombing, and then go through and kind of plan out their idea and use that stuff that we've already started finger knitting and see how to use that.

Laura: I think it'd be cool to get, after it's covered in yard and the knitting, to get the other kids' reactions to it and see what their questions were and what their level



of inquiry was. If you walk by a locker and you see all this covered in yarn, what are your questions around that?

Christine: Well, and there's some great fine art connections because [Christo 00:21:05], back in the 60s, was wrapping packages just out of burlap and twine. It was interesting when I was at one of my other schools, we used that. I had my kids get some sort of little box and we wrapped it with some sort of textile. We used yarns and things to tie it up. Then I did a whole table pile. Oh, and the other thing they had to do is put like a secret wish or some sort of personal statement in the box before they wrapped it up. Man, it was kind of crazy because they were ... There was no unity to the visual of this. Every box was different, but collectively it made ... When you had that artist statement up there, it made a really strong, powerful statement.

Laura: You bring up Christo, what are some of the ... I mean there's a lot of contemporary artists using fiber right now. Do you have any favorites?

Christine: Well, Magdalena Abakanowicz, who is not with us any longer, but she was one of the most powerful influences coming out of a communist block country and not having access to the kind of materials that we're used to. She made monumental sculpture with [inaudible 00:22:41] and burlap. That is really one of my great influences. Some of my personal work right now is I weave with wire. I've been weaving on a loom with wire for about 25 years. I've got some contemporary artists ... I just had a five day workshop with someone who would be a national treasure in our country if we had those roles, [Mary Lee Hugh 00:23:11]. I'm continuing to push the edges of my current learning and I've been weaving for 45 years. I'll never get to the end of it, never.

Matt: Literally.

Laura: Never.

Christine: Never. That's exciting to me.

Laura: We've kind of circled around this, but do you find that there's some gender bias in fiber arts or [crosstalk 00:23:40] society maybe?

Christine: Oh, totally, which is interesting because different cultures, in some cultures like, and I may have this wrong, so don't dis me here, but I think like the Navajos that were the women, but the Pueblo were the men who were the weavers.



[Matt:](#) The men were the weavers, yeah. I'm not sure on the tribe exactly either, but I do know that there's a group of Native Americans where the men were the weavers.

[Christine:](#) In Guatemala than men weaved the yardage for the cloth where the women weaved the backstrap huipils, and even in Africa the men weave Kente cloth. You know what? That whole gender issue has been a struggle for textile artists in the United States for sure, but probably in other countries. I don't know what to say. We could talk for hours about this, but I do want to segue that into the fact that in contemporary art right now there are lots and lots of young artists, men and women, that are bringing textiles and fibers into their work. I think with STEAM, this is where I see the really juicy, juicy place, is that there's just such a natural connection there. I do want to just recognize to our listeners that the University of North Texas last summer made a decision to close their 82 year old fiber program with great gnashing of the teeth and wailing and pleading and ...

[Laura:](#) Some very sad, sad young students. I met the collaborative. They were actually out at one of our schools recently and it was heartbreaking. Their love for this art form ... I'm going to get teary eyed.

[Christine:](#) Well, of course.

[Laura:](#) It was really hard to visit with them and talk to them. Having this taken away from them ... A lot of them were going to be our educators, but some of them were just planning on being fine artists. They would be the last group. They were just heartbroken about not being able to share it forward.

[Christine:](#) I've seen this in my decades, I've seen program after program disappear. I do understand some of the practicality of that, but here's what I ... When I went and talked to the department chair and assembled a spreadsheet in advance of our meeting to show the depth and the breadth of fiber in our industry and in our economics and in science ... The list goes on and on. There are world museums that are dedicated to textiles. What's crazy, because UNT has just become a tier one or it has been for a little while, but it just got re-affirmed as a tier one research university, and that is my alum. That's where I had my art education studies, but I just said to the chair, I'm like, you guys are missing the boat here.

[Laura:](#) Yes.



[Christine:](#) You don't see that this is one of the most important places in 21st century technology. I mean we're not even talking about art, but just the application. It is very frustrating, but what are you going to do?

[Laura:](#) Well, I'm affirmed though. I mean I feel like every time I go into a classroom, having the privilege of my job of going into variety of classrooms and helping direct curriculum, and also in the interview process when I am interviewing young candidates for art education positions, I'm seeing more and more fiber, I really am. I have a lot of new younger-ish teachers that are very into fiber. I have some that are doing different ... I have one that's doing ice bath dye and I have one that's doing soft sculpture. These are things that they have a personal interest and passion in, and then they're bringing that into their classroom.

[Matt:](#) Last year I was sitting in as a judge for the middle school competition and a student brought in their needle felting sculpture. It was this little bear. It was like a ... I can't remember what it was, but it was just so neat because it was all done with felt. I was just blown away by it.

[Laura:](#) Well, and I see a lot of collaborations and community building. We have kind of a common lesson in the district where second grade students create a two dimensional image of either ... We have a lesson plan where they can create germs or they can create kindness creatures. Then the high school 3D class will create that in three dimensional form. Quite often that is a soft sculpture that the 9th and 10th graders are making and then they bring them back to those 2nd graders. It's building this community aspect as well. Seeing that these are not stuffed animals, that these are actually pieces of art that were collaborated on between second graders and high school kids, it really does build community. Again, it goes all back to the textiles.

[Christine:](#) Yeah. Yeah. I just appreciate ... I want to give you a shout out as the visual arts coordinator of the district that I was in, that your support was very, very important. I guess that this is the rest of my lifelong mission as a textile artist and as a forever art educator, that I want to continue really spreading just the knowledge and the information and the support through my website, ExploreFiber.com and just the ... I'm doing visiting artists. What do you to call it? I'm going out to different schools and doing fiber-related projects with them and teaching them about the future of fibers, because they're the ones that are going to really see it happen in their lifetime. It's really thrilling to me to keep that going.



[Matt:](#) Absolutely. As our conversation comes to an end, we always ask for the people that we're talking to, just kind of leave us with some words of wisdom for our listeners. Fiber, just do it.

[Christine:](#) Yeah, fiber, just do it. I think it's just let your children just play and experiment. I think that one of the things that I think ... Okay, here's my word. Teachers don't teach what they don't know. If they don't know how to do something, they're much less likely to bring it into their classroom. If you have a connection to fiber, go visit a fiber group. There are tons of videos. You can teach yourself how to knit with your fingers and just play. Just play and have fun.

[Matt:](#) Yeah, absolutely.

[Laura:](#) Well, you know that we love visiting with you because truly you're part of our art family in so many ways. Shout out to Nana Chris. We have the honor and privilege of having you be a part of our kids' lives and passing on the traditions of fiber to them. Beyond this discussion today, just thank you for everything you do in our community and keep the passion going and share it forward.

[Christine:](#) I will. I love you all so much.

[Laura:](#) We love you too. Thanks.

[Matt:](#) Thanks, Christine. [crosstalk 00:32:14]

[Susan:](#) Heads up seven up friends. If you've been enjoying these episodes, be sure to subscribe to the Creatively Connected Classroom podcast. You'll get a notification every time we release a new episode each and every week and take a screenshot and put it on your favorite social media, Twitter, Insta, Facebook, you name it. Tag EducationCloset and K12 Art Chat so we can reach out and say thanks. If you really love us with all the feels, give us a review and/or a rating over on iTunes. It helps others find the show and connect with our incredible community. Thanks for all your support.