



Matt: Hey everybody, this is Matt and Laura, and welcome to another episode of the creatively connected classroom. We have yet another amazing artist person to talk to you.

Laura: Artist, author, educator, now administrator, Michael Bell is with us.

Matt: So, we welcome you Michael and we're so glad that we've had a chance to know you the past three years, four years.

Laura: Four years or so, yeah.

Matt: And we've loved it, so.

Michael Bell: Well, It's been a pleasure getting to know the both of you, too. It's been fantastic journey and even seeing your rise through all the things that you're doing to promote art education. It's exciting.

Laura: Well, thank you.

Matt: We appreciate it, so.

Laura: Well, with that, you have this really rich story and we'd love to hear a little bit about your background. Just all of your story, not just the art education piece and educator piece, but just who you are.

Michael Bell: Sure. Well, I won my first art show at the age of five and I kept going. I was one of the few people that stayed an artist, I guess you would say out there and I've always championed that. When I was teaching, I championed that among my team and now as a supervisor, I'm championing that among a whole district for teachers, which is really exciting, to stay an artist first because I think that's where the passion that you have for your craft and the dedication it'll instill in your kids when they see you doing it first. And I think that's so important, not to lose that along the way. I don't know how many teachers I've run into that they're spending their days spending ... I mean, you're devoting so much time, I refer to it as 'selfless service for someone else's success,' but it's so important for them to also see you having success as an artist, so that you can also pave the way and they can ride the ride along with



you, which is what many of my students did and now they're doing phenomenal things.

Michael Bell: One of them just had a huge first solo exhibition in Paris and now in New York and is very prominent in the art world. And Jerry Salts, who I had mentioned when we were doing the book talk, he reached out and he said, "You know Louis Fortino," I just mentioned him in this piece, I say, "Yeah, yeah. He was one of my students." He said, "That doesn't surprise me," but he's phenomenal.

Laura: Shout out to Jerry though, we are trying to get him on this podcast at some point.

Matt: Yeah, we are trying to get him.

Michael Bell: He's amazing. But yeah, I mean, but that's what it's about. It's about doing this together. Just like you and I, we've met, and we've been riding this wave as well where we're bringing more people on board. We're bringing more energy into the craft, into the profession, championing visual journaling. The stuff I've been doing with 31 Nights with my pals in the Journal Fodder Junkies and all the stuff that they do as well. So, we're all one. We're all one. We're a big time.

Laura: I would agree. So not to dig too much into your personal life, but you didn't always have it easy as a kid. How did you stick with education and specifically art?

Michael Bell: I would say that I was someone who, much like many of the kids that I would definitely connect with right away, I was someone who was fueled by tragedy. I was fueled by the things that weren't necessarily going right around me. And so I've always used that as a passion of mine. And it's something I would identify right away in kids and it's very easy for me to see. I'd see the same look I had been staring at in the mirror, you know, for how many years, so you recognize it. So, I've always just wanted to try to catch kids before they fall, before they get to a certain point, and also to give them some hope and help them find a creative outlet for the very destructive things that might be going on in their lives.

Laura: I'll let you ask a question, because I have so many. I tend to dominate these conversations. I just get really excited.



- Matt: I just love listening to it. I don't know. There's a lot of questions too.
- Laura: It's like, where do you go? Because well, just thinking about, well, you mentioned the Journal Fodder Junkies. One of the things that Matt and I have seen and we love, you know, connecting it to all classrooms, not necessarily just the art room, but journaling in particular is huge for problem solving, for self esteem, for working through those traumatic events. Why are you such a champion for journaling?
- Michael Bell: Well for me, I always worked in a sketchbook and so it was a way to give voice to everything that was going on in my life. And it would also turn into a process behind the scenes that would lead to much larger final products. It was where I would really find out who I was and what I discovered with working with kids in the classroom, of course too, is that you can find out exactly who they are by looking into those visual journals.
- Michael Bell: Now, you have to allow it to be a place where risk taking is king, where they've gotta be able to step outside of their comfort zone and know that that's okay, because our kids today are censored in so many areas of their life. There's really no way, no place to escape.
- Michael Bell: So for me, I always allowed that visual journal as being that place where that's their safe haven. That's a place to go. And I also found that by prompts, by creating exciting prompts that would dig a little deeper and unpeel and unmask layers and layers of meaning, I would find out more and more about who they were as an artist. And then it would also help pave the path.
- Michael Bell: Talking about Louis Fortino for example, he was someone who, his sketchbooks were amazing. He did these really cool, what you would equate to a doodle, you know, where he would just fill the page with these doodles of all these little figures. But his portraits, while as amazing and realistic as they were. And he was following a very similar path with me, I work very realistic and very large scale. I said, "You know, there's a disconnect between your visual journal and what the work you're producing." I said, "These works are good enough that you should be creating them on a larger scale."



- Michael Bell: And he thought I was crazy. He did. He thought I was nuts. And he started to do it and it freed him up. And then he explained to me how when he was in sophomore year in college, a professor, he started tightening up again and a professor shared a similar thing with him and he said, oh. He said, "This is must be what Michael Bell saw many years ago. He must've been on to it then and maybe that's the direction I should head," and that's exactly the direction that he ended up going, which is, it's truly amazing.
- Matt: That's awesome. You know, you brought up 31 Nights and prompts. How did you, I guess, come up with the idea for using prompts and using those in your classroom for your students?
- Michael Bell: Sure. Well, for me I was always more like a coach on the field, even in the classroom. And on the same way as a supervisor, I'm all about the champion and that energy and getting some energy behind something.
- Michael Bell: And for kids, what I found out was that a lot of them would ask me the question, "You have a style. Your work has a style. I know it's yours when I see it. How do I find mine?" And what I realized was that kids just weren't doing enough work team to find it. That was really the problem. So creating something like 31 Nights where they had 31 consecutive nights of creating something. And I mean, listen, I would say if you can only give me 20 minutes, then just give me 20 minutes consistently, every single night. It's like working out. It's stepping up to the plate.
- Michael Bell: Showing up for the process is very important, but don't skip around because if you start skipping around, what will happen is we won't see any actual growth over time. We won't be able to gauge that progress. So my initial goal, it was almost an experiment to see if, number one, would you get better over time, which you do because you're dedicating your time and spending more time with something over the course of 31 nights.
- Michael Bell: But not only that, all of a sudden you would start to see familiar patterns start to emerge in the work, that it was things that would happen naturally. Like I would notice in one student's sketchbook, for example, Maddie. She had this sketchbook where she started blackening things out in little boxes and little rectangles and little squares. Well, it was a



reflex. It was a natural thing that was occurring, but it would have never shown its face in the larger paintings she would be creating later on, had it not been for finding it first in that visual journal by producing enough work to even see it. Does that make sense?

Laura:

Oh yeah, definitely. We talk about growth over time in education in general and the one thing that's really beautiful about being an art educator is that you can see it. You have these portfolios or even looking through the visual journals or sketchbooks with kids, you can see it when they are, and I love that you use the term as a coach on the field because I think that arts especially, if you're a theater teacher or an art teacher, music teacher, we are more facilitators of that. And we understand that process of facilitating and coaching and being able to step back when it's needed and let them do their thing. I mean, I guess the question in this is, when do you know when to step in and say, "Ooh, we need to redirect or I'm not seeing the growth that I want to see?"

Michael Bell:

Well, it really becomes ... for me, if you're equating it back to the classroom, I was never somebody, I had my expectations. I mean, you could ask anybody that's ever worked with me that they felt the pressure of my high expectations, but it never showed its face in grades. If I ever had to have a conversation with anyone about a grade, I knew I lost them already and it needed to get back to the why. Why are we here in the first place? You know, why am I supposed to be working with you? What's the point of all this? And if they don't understand the point of it, then there is a disconnect. And I think it's our job to step in when we realized that there is a disconnection.

Michael Bell:

And I believe that as educators that I don't care any way you slice it, if a kid's disconnecting, that's your fault. You have to own that and you have to find a way back into their world. It's no longer a world where we just expect everyone to connect to everything that we're doing. So we have to find a way in and that way in is not going to be the same with every student. And so, I know people talk all the time about differentiating instruction and doing all these things. I mean, what it really boils down to is caring and it's that simple. Taking more time, treating that kid as though were your own and doing everything in your power to connect them to something that you know is worthwhile for them to be connected to.



Laura: So, that leads into how do you pull that out of teachers? Because I mean, as a supervisor we have a similar job that is ... I mean, I feel like I'm a coach all the time with my teachers and I want them fired up. I want them passionate. I want them to know their why.

Michael Bell: Yeah.

Laura: Why am I teaching? If you don't know why you're teaching? There's a problem.

Michael Bell: Absolutely.

Laura: So, you know, I love that, you know, even in the beginning of the conversation you talked about always performing and having your craft be a part of your life.

Michael Bell: Sure.

Laura: I know that I've mentioned this before, but I went through seven years as an assistant principal where I wasn't making art and I wasn't a whole person and you and I really as a supervisor try to model the art making to my teachers for that very purpose.

Michael Bell: And you do.

Laura: Well, thank you.

Michael Bell: No, you do a great job of that. I mean, you really truly do. You live it. You walk the walk, which is, that's what you want.

Laura: I think as a leader, you have to walk the walk. I think that that's ... In our circles, my family, Matt, and the kids, we are all in this world and we're all walking the walk together and that's really important. But how do you pull that out of your teachers? You know?

Michael Bell: Well, when I stepped into the role, I really wanted them to truly understand that I did truly care and that everything that made me a national award-winning teacher is also what's fueling me as a supervisor now. I'm championing it in teachers and I know what it is to win and I know what it is to do all these great things, so I want to do it for them.



Michael Bell: Now, stepping into this new district, I also gave them a game. They haven't had a game before. They haven't been the new game in town. They haven't had a spotlight shine on the great work that they've done for a long, long time, so they felt undervalued. They felt under appreciated and they're grateful that they have somebody that does care about them, more than they could ever possibly know. We just started up a huge art show, K through 12, at both high schools, simultaneously, the same week in the district, called Art Scene. It was huge. It was a tremendous success for the first one.

Michael Bell: And getting back to that mentality of being a coach, I equated it when I was pitching it to them and I said, "Listen, a kid will show up for practice and work hard for a couple hours every single day for their coach. But not if there's not a game. They won't show up everyday for practice if no one's ever going to see them in a game. Their family, their friends. So why are kids showing up in your classroom every day and expected to work hard for you in art?" Well, they may like your curriculum, they may like some of the projects that you've tossed and some of the ideas you're throwing their way. They may like you as a teacher, but if there's a game, that end result, the external results, some other reason to create, that somebody is actually going to see this.

Michael Bell: I mean, when I went out there, I was so proud of them. I mean I saw it. They brought it and there was kids creating art live. There was kids working on the potter's wheel. Kids doing live paint demos. I mean, and I asked some of the kids, I said, "Have you ever created in front of this many people before?" They were like, "No."

Michael Bell: And they loved it. I mean, it's so cool. They had a game. So I think getting back to your question, how do I do that? I mean, I share with them the passion that I have for it, but I'm all about action. I never bring something to the table, I never talk. I just act. I give them results and I give them a clear cut vision on what I see is important for us as a district.

Michael Bell: Visual journaling is one of them. Being a team, being a team together on the journey is another one. And realizing that everybody's gonna get a chance at that spotlight. Everybody's going to get that opportunity. So I've just been trying to champion them and putting their great work out



there as much as I possibly can. Probably more so than most supervisors in my area. So, I'm doing the best I can for them. That's all I can do.

Laura: Yay. I think we're kindred spirits.

Michael Bell: We are.

Laura: You got one?

Matt: No. I just say no. I'm just, you know, awestruck.

Michael Bell: I mean, it's fun and getting back to what you were saying about the art making, too. Sure, it's difficult to keep that process alive while you're doing all these other things. My deputy superintendent was asking me the other day, "Do you miss being in your studio daily?" And I said, not really because I believe that our studio is surrounded with the people that are in our profession all the time. If I'm walking into an elementary art teacher's studio or classroom studio, that's my studio, too. I'm inspiring them; they're inspiring me. It's everywhere. And I think that it's just important to find your moments where you do have a little time to create and you do have a little time to connect with your own process. And that's important.

Matt: Oh, I mean I've found myself, I got a nice big, brand new journal for Christmas and I've been finding myself using that so much more in the classroom, working through, you know, whatever the kids or whatever their project is, I'm working on mine too at the same time. And I mean I've found more growth in myself just the past six months.

Laura: Well, and I think what I've heard from you is it the side by side working and just like what Michael was saying is, you know, when I go into a classroom and I sit down in an elementary art studio and I sit down to a kid I've never met and I start making something next to them, it opens a door.

Michael Bell: It sure does.

Matt: Conversation.

Laura: Yeah.





- Michael Bell: Absolutely.
- Matt: You know, and then you start asking them for feedback. I mean, I asked just last week, I asked two middle school kids, I'm like, "Hey, what do you guys think? What should I add to this? What should I not?" And they were just kinda like, did this quick jerk all of a sudden they were like, "Wait, you want my feedback?"
- Laura: You value me as an artist.
- Michael Bell: Absolutely, and that's the mentality you want to create where you're all artists and you know, I share that with my teachers all the time.
- Michael Bell: The first week when we were back, I said, "When you step in that room for the very first time in that studio, create right alongside of them. Throw all the initial rules and regulations stuff out the window. Have some fun getting to know them, prompt them things like, 'If you really knew me, you would know.' Find out about them. 'When I look in the mirror, I see.' Do some self portraits and inject some text into it. Find out some context."
- Michael Bell: If you start to learn their stories, you'll be able to help them pull their stories out of them through different mediums, different techniques, different ways of going there and finding those narratives. But it's important for us to also share our stories with them so that they understand that we're all born from stories.
- Laura: I mean, it's so funny. I've just heard so much about narrative lately and it's something that sometimes people are afraid of. I was speaking to a very young teacher the other day and she said she's afraid to tell her students anything personal. And I said, "Well, my opinion on that is that I am very open." I mean, that's very clear the way we live our lives. Everybody knows everything about us.
- Michael Bell: Sure.
- Laura: But I think that was modeled to me. Actually, my mother was a teacher and she taught at my high school, and I would be in second or third period and some kid would have had my mom first period and they'd be



like, "Hey, I heard what happened over the weekend at your house." I'm like, "Great, mom."

Laura: But it's real life and they need to know that we're real humans, that when they see us at the grocery store.

Matt: Oh, we still get that.

Laura: Exactly. That it's not weird.

Matt: "Mr. Grunler. Mr. Grunler."

Michael Bell: "He's right over there."

Laura: Yeah.

Matt: "It's the art teacher."

Michael Bell: And I think that when you make those connections though, they become such lifelong connections. And even, you know, I was so happy just seeing, when I was at the Art Scene shows this week, just walking around and seeing teachers that had never seen those particular students in that light before.

Michael Bell: You know, principals of the school coming up to me and saying, "I had no idea this kid could do that." They're changing the perception, even of the individuals that are in their building just with exhibiting the work, getting it out there, regardless of whether it sells, regardless of whether it wins an award, that moment of being out there and being able to share a piece of your soul with the world, that's humanity at its best. It truly is.

Michael Bell: And as artists, I mean, we're courageous to be putting that out there. And I also think we're creating something often from nothing. And that's a hard concept for a lot of people to grasp. They can't understand what it is that we do. So I think it's important for us to constantly show the world what it is that we do. That's so important.

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Laura: Yeah. You know, going back to just sharing a part of yourself. Beyond the arts, you're a huge advocate for students with autism. And I know April is Autism Awareness Month. One of my very best friends is an autism specialist and I love seeing all your posts.

Matt: You're always wearing blue.

Laura: Yes. So, tell us a little bit about why you're such an autism advocate. I mean, for the kids that ... I think I know why, but I'd love the community here why?

Michael Bell: Sure. Well, it's really interesting how life comes full circle, doesn't it? In 2008, our son was born in 2007 so he was one at the time. He was only one years old and I was doing a autism ... It was a Stars and Cigars benefit with all the cast members from the Sopranos. And I had auctioned off a piece of work and they had signed it and we had done a big thing and we raised so many thousands and thousands of dollars at night and the benefit was for autism.

Michael Bell: And the whole time I was there I was learning about it and I didn't really understand why I was there, though. I hadn't personally touched upon it in my life in any way, shape or form really. And so I didn't know much about it. And as it turns out, by the time our son turned seven, we received his first autism diagnosis. His official one from Kennedy Krieger, down in Baltimore.

Michael Bell: And so of course now, you know, it affected us in very personal ways. And I relate that experience to ... I'd read this poem somebody had sent me when we got his diagnosis and I wrote, "I believe in me," right above his door because I think instilling it, getting back to even the stuff we do with our kids in art, I think instilling belief is almost the most important job that we have on a daily basis with kids, with any kid, whether they have autism or not.

Michael Bell: And somebody had sent me this poem, it was called "Welcome to Holland." I don't know if you've ever heard it. Have you ever heard it?



Look it up sometime. It's really interesting, because it talks about this family that I believe they were scheduled to go to Italy.

Michael Bell: And so they bought all the books. They learned the language, they were prepared for their trip, yet the plane's diverted and they land in Holland. But they're also never leaving Holland. And so it was very ... I mean, it resonated because like with us on it was, you know, he's never leaving that. It's not something where you take a magic pill and there's a cure. He is who he is and everybody who's on the spectrum, it's such a huge spectrum that everyone's so different and they have so many gifts. They have so many great gifts, but it's up for us to go into his world and find out what those gifts are. Figure out, just like with art, the patterns that he would emerge in his life where he would be telling me something through things he'd be watching constantly on television, whether it's books he'd be reading, whatever it is, I'd recognize the patterns in a very artful way.

Michael Bell: And so, that's my big connection to it. And I'll definitely be wearing blue and championing his cause until the day I die. It's a great thing.

Matt: Awesome.

Laura: Just on the same note, you know, you have all these great pictures that you post at him and you boxing. What's that all about?

Michael Bell: You know, he went through some rough patches with school. I mean, really rough, where kids don't really truly understand that when a child has differences, to be accepting of them and to love them for who they are first. And a lot of times that's not quite fostered in the classrooms either with teachers. And so, I wanted to get in front of any situations, so he didn't have any bullying situations in schools and stuff like that. And I thought, well, let's toughen him up.

Michael Bell: My grandfather was a boxer, let's try the boxing gym. There was a boxing gym that opened up near us and one of the custodians that worked in my building said, he's a Brooklyn guy, you'd get along great with him. You should go down there. So, I did. And He fell in love with it and the boxing actually helped him really come out of his shell and it really helped his self confidence.



Michael Bell: I mean, he was going to the Golden Gloves matches. I mean, he's living around a bunch of fighters and that's really what it's about. It's instilling that fight in him, more so than just being able to be a skilled fighter, it's instilling the fight that you have to overcome so many things in your life that are so hard. And we both have.

Michael Bell: But his fight's different than mine and he has different challenges. So the boxing, it really helped him in so many ways. So he's been boxing for four years. He's pretty much taken this year off, with my new job and he had to get braces so he couldn't go into the ring.

Matt: Yeah, that could be a challenge.

Michael Bell: But, he'll get back to it. But we still keep it going and keep it in practice. And so for anybody out there, I'd say give it a shot. It's not for everybody, but I mean, it takes a lot of courage to step into that ring against someone else. And he said, "I felt alive in there." He said, "For the very first time," he said, "I felt so alive."

Matt: That's awesome.

Michael Bell: I was so happy to be there and be a part of it.

Matt: That's like wrestling. I can relate to that. So I was glad to hear you talk about that because yeah.

Laura: Well, and our son, he's got some other challenges, not autism, but we've done taekwondo for a long time. But then he started the acting thing and man, it once a kid finds whatever lights them up. That is huge. And whether it be art or boxing or theater or whatever it is, you've got to help them find their thing, their passion.

Michael Bell: We do. And I think that's our job. And I look at it as my job as a supervisor too now is to provide the opportunities to find a way to push back against a system of academics where, you know, the visual and performing arts really should be in the forefront. They should really be first, because that's self expression. Everything else, it comes later. I mean, my students had over \$10 million in scholarships. The past five years I was teaching alone, we were averaging over 2 million a year. They



had one, all the national awards, National Scholastic metals, NAA Rising Star award winners.

Michael Bell: It was because of the creativity. It wasn't because they were academically sound that made them better artists. It's because they were artists that made them better academically. And that's what people don't, they don't realize the importance that way.

Laura: We do.

Michael Bell: Yeah, we do. We do.

Matt: We get it.

Laura: It kills me to hear, "Oh, well you're not core," or you're not academic. I'm like, excuse me?

Matt: Okay, sure.

Laura: Everything, all the dots that are connected in our creative endeavors just don't ... it blows my mind. But I know that it makes me excited to know that there's people like you and a lot of our core base of listeners and friends that are all championing the arts and the importance of the creative connections.

Michael Bell: Absolutely. We're doing it. We're doing everything we can for the kids and more so now for the teachers too, so that we're creating a safe place for them to do authentic work with these kids, to be professionals, trust them as professionals, to give them the capacity, build the capacity in them so they can go out there and run and do your thing and get out of their way and allow them to be doing amazing things.

Matt: Yeah. I think before we wrap up and get some final words of wisdom from you, the very last question you had in the chat was just talking about the new 31 prompt and it was called Ignite 31. Can you just kind of tell some people about that before get some more?

Michael Bell: Absolutely. Actually, it was inspired by talking to a dance teacher in my district who is doing phenomenal things. And she said that she had heard about my 31 Nights and she was wondering if there was a



connection, if there was a way to do it with dance. And so I immediately thought, well, what if a student did some type of a dance-related activity and videotaped it for say 30, 31 seconds? You know? Or something or something along those lines. And she was like, "Wow, that's a fantastic idea. You could even," and she took it further, she like, "Well we could even do it for longer. Every night, they could be doing something and do a time lapse and that could last for 30 seconds or something like that. And we could do it for 31 nights."

Michael Bell: So that's where it came from, just that igniting that spark, something that could be spontaneous. It's very difficult to create something quick. Although I have done prompts over the years with kids where we've created 30 works in 90 minutes and they'd be unstructured time. Yeah, fun stuff.

Laura: You would be so tired afterwards.

Michael Bell: Oh, it is. But it's intense and I've done it myself where I create 30 drawings off of one work, off of one prompt or one thing. And so when you have an instructor calling out, "Okay, go," and you start drawing and then they stop you after 30 seconds, and you have to be stuck with that piece whatever it is, it puts something inside of you that whatever mark I'm making, it needs to be intentional, it needs to matter right in here, right now.

Michael Bell: And so, that's where some of that came from. That's where that ignite prompt. It's just something that sparked just all of a sudden having that conversation with that teacher, creative conversation.

Laura: I love the idea because you really could pull it into-

Matt: Anything.

Laura: Yeah, anything, because our mission is really to pull creative ideas into all classrooms and not just limit it to an art or a performing art room. So, that's something you could absolutely pull into any classroom. Yeah, I can think of a lot of ways you could use it in ELA or ... man, that's really cool. Yeah.

Matt: So as we part, any last, amazing, awe-inspiring additional-



Laura: I think we'll have to have him back on. So great.

Michael Bell: I'd be happy to come back on any time. I would just, I'll leave you with what I left my own crew with at the end of my last February PD. And that was just keep going. It's important work that everybody's doing and everybody has an important piece to play. They may not realize what it is at this given moment, but they need to really be connected to being very present for their kids and to keep going because they matter. Everything you do matters, more than you even realize. So we've gotta keep going.

Matt: Absolutely. All right. Well Michael, we certainly appreciate you taking the time and inspiring everybody, the listeners and us as well. We're always inspired by you.

Michael Bell: The feeling is mutual. Got nothing but love for you all you guys. Do your thing.

Laura: It's so exciting. I mean, inspiring is the best word. Every time we do an interview with somebody, especially somebody we feel close to, I feel pumped up for the week. I love doing them and getting excited and ready to go back to work. So thank you so much.

Matt: So enjoy the rest of your day.

Michael Bell: You too.

Matt: Enjoy your weekend and we'll talk with you later.

Michael Bell: Thank you so much.

Laura: Bye Michael.

Matt: All right, bye Michael.

Laura: Thank you, bye.

Michael Bell: Thank you.

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