

Where has creativity in the classroom gone? Join Matt and Laura as they explore creativity and curriculum slams with Curriculum Content Specialist Michelle Ridlen.

Show Transcript

Announcer 1: You're listening to the Creatively Connected Classroom Podcast, episode number 36.

Announcer 2: Welcome to the Creatively Connected Podcast from Education Closet, connecting teachers and ideas, one glue stick at a time. Here's your hosts and K-12 Art Chat founders, Matt and Laura Grundler.

Matt: Hey everybody. This is Matt and Laura, and welcome to another episode of the Creatively Connected Classroom. We are kind of playing catch-up a little bit with this one, and I'm glad we are because I was thinking about it. And it was kind of a differently run chat.

Laura: Yeah. My good friend, Michelle Ridlen from Missouri, is joining us today, really excited to have her. I had the honor of spending a week with her last year at the School for Art Leaders and getting to know her better and just really enjoying our friendship and also the fact that we're very like-minded in education. Reached out to Michelle and said, "Hey, can you host a chat?" And she-

Matt: She kind of said, "Well, maybe."

Laura: Because she was also running the Missouri Art Educators Association Conference at the same time. She-

Matt: Curriculum slam.

Laura: A curriculum slam. We're really excited to have you, Michelle. I think probably most important to start with, who are you and what do you do in education, if you can tell the audience a little bit about your background we'd love that.

Michelle: Sure. I am an artist educator in Missouri in a suburb close to St. Louis. I have worked at all different levels, from elementary to middle to high school and started off in high school, switched to middle school, switched back to high school, and then became a curriculum content leader in my district. And now I work with teachers writing curriculum for our district in all of fine arts. Not only visual art, but theater and music as

well. And then because I missed the classroom, I teach at our summer school program art classes sometimes as well.

Matt: That's cool.

Laura: That's amazing.

Matt: That's awesome.

Laura: I think it's really cool too that you've gotten a chance to bridge out into the other fine arts areas. And as a curriculum content specialist, can you tell us a little bit more about your work? Because that's an interesting job, I don't think that's a job that all school districts have.

Michelle: True, they don't. We're really lucky to have a full-time position dedicated to that. So we have a really, what we call a robust, curriculum cycle, it's six steps. And we write a very in-depth curriculum for each course that we offer. And so I work with teachers through each of our six steps of our curriculum and I can probably give you a really long answer which is we research class practices for whatever course we're writing one year, and then the next year we work on actually writing the curriculum.

Michelle: So we use the understanding by design model. And we write all three steps in our curriculum. So we write the end result, the standard, and theme at the beginning, then we move into a common assessment. And then we also do step three which is writing ample lesson plans to help support teachers as they're looking at the assessments and the standards that they're supposed to be teaching in each unit.

Michelle: And the following year we do professional development and get ready to implement the curriculum and examine resources. The following year we really implement with fidelity and then we monitor data. We do the common assessments, then we look at data to drive our instruction and see how it's going. And then the sixth year we start over and we do a course evaluation and prepare to re-enter the cycle again. So I meet with teachers in all six of those steps, I visit classrooms, and spend a lot of time looking at all those different pieces.

Matt: Wow. That's-

Laura: I, well no I'm nerdy so I get really... I love that your district does that because I think a lot of times, I've talked to so many teachers that have been in this same boat, but when I started teaching I walked into a room with zero resources. Zero curriculum, zero lesson plans, zero understanding of any... I mean I was straight out of student teaching and I had had some great mentor teachers, but they had a curriculum they

were working in and I walked into this situation where I had zero supplies and zero curriculum and you just don't know where to start.

Michelle: Right.

Laura: So I think it's really amazing also being a fan of understanding by design. I love that your questions definitely had that real... I could see that you were a UBD person because your very first question was about big ideas and essential questions and how they inspire creative thinking. So talk to us a little bit more about that.

Michelle: Yeah, when I got started in this job about ten years ago, we were really trained to figure out where has the creativity gone with our students? We were really struggling with it seemed like students had been taught out of being creative, or they no longer knew how. And so the department in the high school that I was at we really started to ask, "Well, how do you teach creativity?" And we tried to do research, but all of the books that have been written since then didn't exist yet. I wish they had been there, we were really starting from scratch and so we really had to figure it out on our own. And we looked at what motivated students and we realized that a lot of things that we were doing created just very dry checklists.

Michelle: So, you know, did you include six colors, did you do the five kinds of lines, and it became a checklist for students that they weren't responding to authentically, and so we realized that we needed to be asking them questions about what they wanted to make art about and what was going on inside their heads. And so that lead us to big ideas and questions that we wanted students to explore on their own, like authentic artists. And then I got into curriculum and I was like, "Oh, this UBD guy has it all figured out already. Great."

Michelle: Yeah so that's kind of where that came. We started to really look at switching our approach to how we lesson planned and that translated into our curriculum. Well how do artists make art? Artists don't wake up to, I think it was Olivia Gude, and she said, "Artists don't wake up and go, I can't wait to make art about lines." So we really started to think about what questions do artists ask and where do they find these questions and how can we get students asking their own questions.

Matt: I think that's awesome because one of your other questions that you already kind of hit on was, "How do you cultivate personal meaning making in your room?" And I think you kind of hit that in finding more out about the students.

Michelle: Yeah, another big piece is really cultivating those relationships. You really have to dig into building a classroom community and get to know your students before

they trust you to answer the questions you're asking of them. So it was another big push for us.

Laura: I'm going to take us in a different direction since you brought up Olivia Gude. Shout out to amazing Olivia Gude, every time I hear her speak I get really excited. Although there's this conversation and this is where it gets dicey.

Michelle: Mm-hmm

Laura: It's almost like there's these different camps in education, at least in art education right now about teaching artistic behavior and process versus the product. Where do you think that your curriculum design fits into that?

Michelle: Well that's a-

Laura: Would you label it? Would you put a label on it? Are you on your teaching style?

Michelle: Oh...

Laura: I know I told you I was going to get serious now.

Michelle: Yeah. Let's see well I am definitely, I'm a big believer in process over product. I think students feel successful when they have a good end product, but you can't get them to a good end product without having them invest in the process. And so it's really a careful balance of getting them to ask their own questions or seek their own answers so they take more ownership of their learning. So that being said, kind of going back to what you asked about studio habits of mine, I really look at it and think about curriculum and standards through maybe a different way than other people do, I really look at it through a three dimensional learning model. Where it's not just about... You start with a standard, but then you throw in skills with media.

Laura: Right.

Michelle: And then you also bring in, and by extension award teaching habits for disposition, and so it's really important for me to have all three of those things working together to create a full instructional model.

Laura: Yeah.

Matt: Yeah.

Laura: That's-

Matt: I think we kind of-

Laura: Well that's exactly how I feel about it. Because I have a hard time really putting a label on... I absolutely believe in process is the place where the learning really happens and the meaning making really occurs.

Michelle: Yeah.

Laura: But I also do agree that an end product must have a strong process and product is also where the creative confidence is built, you know?

Michelle: Right.

Laura: That creative confidence

Matt: If it looks good-

Laura: Creative confidence they're excited about that end product. That's where that confidence gets really. And you can't throw out the baby, what is that? Throw out the bath water with the baby or whatever you say.

Michelle: Yeah.

Laura: I mean those of us that are a little older were trained in a very formulaic model. And I'm not necessarily a fan of that either, but I do think that you have to have the skills and you have to have the variety of media.

Michelle: Yes.

Laura: And it can't just be, here's your buffet of art media, go for it and make meaning on your own. That's just not authentic learning, that's not deep critical thinking.

Michelle: Yeah. And I really think it's important, I mean we're talking about art education in schools. It's different than just making art on your own.

Laura: Right.

Michelle: And I think it's important to recognize that we have a role to play as educators in offering expertise and what we have to offer from life experience. To share that with our students. And I think if we're only a person, a body in the room, then that's dangerous and so you really have to think carefully about what you bring to the studio environment. And you can't just let students run loose I guess.

Matt: I think as an instructor you have to have a sense of instructing in the sense that where you're teaching them... Because as they're students in your classroom, you have to be able to say, "Hey you're building their experience" and saying this is what that

material does. And teaching through that. And then allowing that experimentation and that exploring, I think after that.

Laura: Well and I know this discussion is very art education-centered, but I think that one interesting piece to the puzzle, at least for myself and a lot of art teachers as we've gone through curriculum design is that we think in terms of projects.

Michelle: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Laura: That's how art teachers think. But when you really look at curriculum design you have to think in terms of units.

Michelle: Yes.

Laura: And that there's all these components that lead to that end assessment, which in our case is often a product, but that it's your scaffolding, all these skill builders, all these pieces leading up to the student making that end assessment happen. And I think it's real hard to kind of switch gears and think beyond the project and think of how you... At least in working with a lot of my teachers, we've just, and I'm including myself in that, I mean when I started teaching, it was, "Okay, we're going to do a contour line project."

Michelle: Right.

Laura: "All right, now we're doing the value study project". You know?

Michelle: Yeah, and that's exactly the same way, I was. I was a little anxious I had to really wrap my head around my own artist identity besides my educator identity. I struggled I think as a beginning teacher for a real long time with this duality of, I'm a teacher on this side and my artist self on this side. And for some reason I was keeping them separate and I had to realize, how do I bring them together, and how do I really embrace those habits, those dispositions-

Laura: Yes.

Michelle: Those studio habits of mine that I use as an artist, how do I bring those into my classroom and how do I cultivate them in my students? And so I had to really shift from thinking in terms of projects to thinking in big ideas that artists explore. And they often explore them through series of works, or maybe even through their whole career.

Laura: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Michelle: And so what kind of topics do I expose students to so that they're interested in exploring them. Or how do they do their personal take on it? So when I was able to finally kind of shift my own thinking to that, it became a lot easier and I stopped thinking in terms of projects.

Laura: I'm sorry, I know I'm dominating the conversation, it's just exciting. I've been really thinking a lot about... This is just timely because the AP College Board is changing the way the studio is going to be next year, the studio portfolios. And it's really exciting to me because it fits so nicely with all the work we've been doing with UBD and essential questions and exploration and big ideas. And what you just said rings so true because I've been working through with the expectation of the change in how that AP College Board piece is going to look. I was just exploring it for myself in terms of a process journal, and looking at how do we document process, how do we explore ideas? And for me, working within a series.

Michelle: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Laura: In how am I exploring these couple of ideas within this one series of work. And it's been really interesting. I think that all of us as artists and teachers really need to, just like you said, bring those two halves of ourselves together. And then that students will have the best of us.

Susan Riley: Hi there. This is Susan Riley, founder of EducationCloset. If you love these conversations with Team Grundler and friends, please be sure to check out K-12ArtChat on Twitter. The chat is held every Thursday at 8:30 pm central and it's a great way to continue the conversation. Just go to [twitter.com](https://twitter.com/K12artchat) and search hashtag K12artchat. We look forward to chatting with you over there soon. Now, let's head back to the show.

Matt: Every time I start to think about a question that I'm going to ask, you've already answered it in the previous statement so I'm like...

Matt: You know, I think you started to hit on something earlier where you were talking about where has creativity gone. And I know as an educator we sometimes go, "Whoa, who else can we look to other than the top five that are all carved in stone?" And I think the thing is just like with the kids, we just have to look harder. You see more and more through Instagram, we see more and more through social medias, we see more and more through... I'm finding more and more artists that I'm coming in contact with to be able to pull into my classroom and say... And I've actually even had these artists be able to interact with my kids through FaceTime or they did a video of all my kid's questions that they asked, I typed them all up and sent them to this artist and they did a video answering all the questions that they asked. So it was just kind of cool to say,

"We've talked with this artist and this is their story or this is where they pull their information from or their inspiration from."

Laura: Yeah, I think, I mean one of your questions, Michelle, was about contemporary artwork and artists and how you bring that into your classroom and for our students and where they live. They live in social media, a lot of them and so to bring in the Instagram component is bringing in contemporary art. I think that that's a very valid place for a lot of our kids, I think that a lot of them look to Instagram to find up-and-coming artists or people that they're drawn to and I think that if we're not doing that, then we're not staying up with our kids.

Michelle: Yeah, I think that's been another big transition for us, is realizing, I don't know, a lot of teachers I work with and myself included, for quite a while, were really intimidated by contemporary art. Because we don't necessarily understand it or it wasn't as accessible to learn about it before you would go see it. Art21, another shout out there-

Laura: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Michelle: Has been so instrumental in opening the door to contemporary art and helping people understand it and hearing from contemporary artists and just kind of exploring that world. And it has been another big shift where we're not just sharing traditional artists that have been in this canon that we recognize as being the greats, but now we're talking about the greats that walk among us. And we're looking at who's creating artwork now and how do we know that that instant access to their artwork that they're creating for social media and through things on the internet, that you're actually able to gain a greater understanding and you're really able to reach out to them.

Michelle: And another great thing that I love about our transition, when the new National Visual Art Standards came out we were all on board because it really set into what we were discovering about student creativity and how do we insert that, and so we really loved that and embraced the process. And we really got to this idea that we have to also teach, how do you discern good art from bad art. Is there such things as good art and bad art? And so when we were looking at contemporary art, how do you know that the person that you're looking at... We were kind of looking at them through that old lens of, "Is this person is this artist going to be one of the greats that we will then look at many many years from now?" And then we kind of almost transitioned past that to it doesn't matter, they're making art and we want our students to make art.

Laura: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Michelle: It's all about the creative act and the process.

Matt: Yeah, no I was just thinking about-

Laura: Koons, ninety-one million dollars. That's what I was thinking about. Yeah, I see your face I got into a whole debate. But the person I was talking to... Okay so for our listeners that maybe aren't staying up with the art world, Koons just sold a reflective Playboy Bunny rabbit for ninety-one million dollars and it has a lot of thought about contemporary society about it and it's all about looking at yourself in the reflective blah blah blah blah blah blah. I'm being a little facetious right now.

Matt: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Laura: But I think that goes back to that question about good art and bad art and the idea of being at least to have a conversation. When I think about UBD I think about those enduring understandings. I'm realistic to know that most of our students aren't going to be fine artists working in a studio, they're going to be citizens of our world that need to be able to have a conversation about something they saw on the news, like a piece of art selling for ninety-one million dollars. And why they feel or don't feel that it's worth that. Or what makes it good art or bad art. That's what I want for students is to walk away from a class in high school and feel like, "Oh I can hold a conversation about this, I know enough-"

Matt: I can say why.

Laura: To be able to have an opinion, and have some discourse.

Michelle: Yeah. I have a lot of strong feelings about Koons as well. I think it was a Sundance channel forever ago used to have this really great show where they would have somebody not connected, another famous person interviewing another famous person, and somebody chose to do Jeff Koons. And he brought them into their studio and basically exposed that he has all these students working for him. He takes their ideas and has them execute them and puts his name on them. And I was like, "No, that's not his idea, and not his hands involved" it totally shattered the mythos of Jeff Koons for me, right? And then I thought, that's a great thing to bring into my classroom. Can an artist call himself an artist if it's not his idea and it's not him making it? But yet, he's the one cashing the check. Because he's doing all the work of selling it, is it selling the idea, does that make you an artist? So anyway, I've got lots of opinions on Koons that we can talk about.

Matt: When you were talking about the traditional versus the non-traditional or the contemporary, one of my favorite questions that I love to lead into, especially if we've taught something really traditional like print-making or calligraphy or whatever it is, something that can be traced back as far as it possibly can, one of the questions I love

asking is, how do you use something that's traditional in a non-traditional way? And to see a lot of really contemporary artists who do print-making but not necessarily do it in the sense of how it was done way back then. And it's just interesting to hear the conversations about it.

Michelle: Yeah. Absolutely, I do think that's great. One of our units that we have at our middle school level is tradition. And one of the questions is, would you break from tradition or would you choose to follow a tradition? And so it's kind of the same idea of let's look at what artists have done in the past and how have they taken in a craft and an idea and turned it on it's head, or how have they embraced it and taken it further? I love that. Bringing the new with the old together.

Laura: I was just reading one of your questions you've said was, "What do you do when a student who gets stuck, either with an idea or process?" And I think just the questions. For me that's for when their stuck I just start asking them more questions. Clearly, it makes it a lot easier to ask those questions when you have a relationship with the student, but I think just helping them dig in and that being stuck is part of the process sometimes that you have to move past that and what would your suggestions be for helping the stuck student?

Michelle: Oh, that's a great question. Because a lot of it's getting them jump-started right?

Matt: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Michelle: So I usually try... I'm trying to think of the title of a book. I had this great book in my art room and it was basically just a book of questions. It was like, something about being ignorant, or asking ignorant questions. I wish I could remember the title. But I would have them... I always had little things like that and I would say, "Thumb through this book".

Michelle: The thing about artists is art is everywhere and ideas are everywhere. It's about really observing your world and seeing what sticks out to you, what do you see over and over again that you just can't get out of your head? What things in your point of view are doing that for you in your world? Art is this idea of art being a window or art being a mirror, and how we either reflect our world or we open the world and see it from a new perspective. And it's important to nurture that way of thinking in students so that they have a way to look at the way they see the world as being important, and it doesn't have to be like everybody else's.

Michelle: So I would try to start every unit with exposing them to something new. Getting them engaged in some way. So that might be through looking at a work of art

that they had never thought about looking at before or looking at the work of an artist and hearing them talk, sometimes it was a quote. Sometimes it was thumbing through this book, or letting them go through experiences that things would happen or would select themselves for them at random. So throwing pieces of paper up in the air that would have words or ideas in the air and they'd have to pick one. So lots of different things like that.

Michelle: But that was to get them jump-started when they'd get stuck. Again, a lot of the times for me it was really sitting down with the students and talking about where they were getting stuck. Was it stuck in the terms of, "I can't get the media to do what I want it to do, what's in my head, what I'm picturing"? And if that was the case then it was, "Well maybe let's set that aside and let's go do something else." Or if they're working with colored pencils, let's maybe do oil pastels or something completely different that will free up your way of thinking. Let's do something more fluid or if it was the idea piece it was more about, "Well what's going on in your world?" And I'd have them go off on a tangent, we'd have a conversation about something and I'd say, "Has anything that we've talked about, has it been meaningful enough that you might want to explore what it means to share that with somebody else?" So it kind of depends on how they're stuck.

Laura: Yeah.

Matt: That's true. Okay, so I guess as we conclude our conversation, what kind of last bits of words of wisdom would you impart on anybody? That we haven't already talked about maybe.

Laura: Or maybe what would you suggest about-

Matt: Someone getting started.

Laura: Someone getting started with revamping curriculum or making this curriculum shift to make it more meaningful or more meaty?

Michelle: That's great question. I think a lot of it is about staying curious, right? It's about being curious yourself and it's also about fostering curiosity in your students. And so, how do you feed that for yourselves? You go look at art. Do you expose yourself to things that you wouldn't necessarily have tried before or explored before? And how can you share those new experiences with students and how do you bring that into your classroom and bring the world into the classroom work with your students?

Matt: Wow.

Laura: I love it.

Laura: Sometimes when we have these conversations I just wish we could get everybody in one room and do something amazing, you know?

Michelle: Yeah.

Laura: We've been re-writing our middle school curriculum and I'm like, "Oh, I want a unit on tradition, we don't have that unit, we have..." What do we have? We have artistic investigation, we have identity, responsibility. We have some good ones for middle school, but I'm like, "Oh didn't think about that one." All these great brains together.

Matt: I think there's pulling those essential questions or those big ideas to start off at. No matter what unit it might be involved in, I think you can still pull that in.

Laura: Yeah, I think that I loved that that was your very first question about the big ideas and the essential questions because if we're not bringing those in and continually bringing them in, it's not about just having a question on the board, it's about really digging into the question. And I think that that's something that we need to continue to do and I love that you said we need to continue to be curious. Because I don't know about you but I'm always learning every single day.

Michelle: Yes.

Laura: Sometimes I don't even want to be the one learning.

Matt: Sometimes.

Laura: Sometimes, most of the time I do.

Michelle: Well, Laura, I like what you said about bringing everybody in the room together. So I started a website with that same idea. Through curriculum, Optimistic Discontent, I don't know if you've looked at it, but the title comes from, I'm an optimist, but I'm also discontented with the way things are continuing to go.

Laura: Yeah.

Michelle: So I'm not just going to sit and be a curmudgeon about it, I want to continue to work on things and be ultimately curious.

Laura: Yeah.

Michelle: And I'm optimistic about making progress. So the website was all about curriculum writing as a resource and then getting people... I would like to, this is where it's lacking is I need more people to find it. So we're sharing those ideas, so that the units that you feel like are really good themes and big ideas, sharing those with other people online.

Laura: Oh, I love that.

Matt: Definitely cool.

Laura: I'm so glad you just shared that. Say it one more time for the audience so they can find it.

Michelle: It is optimisticdiscontent.com.

Laura: Easy.

Matt: Cool, awesome.

Laura: All right. Yeah and we will share it out to our audience as well.

Matt: For sure.

Laura: So it's really exciting. I think that's what Creatively Connected is all about. Is coming together to continue to improve education across our country. And to bring in the creative components into all classrooms, not just the art room.

Michelle: I love it.

Laura: Yeah. That's what it's all about. So thank you so much for joining us in the inclement weather that you're in right now in Tornado Alley, we really appreciate it.

Michelle: Yes. Thank you so much for having me, this was great.

Laura: Yeah. Well you know we'll be talking again soon.

Michelle: Sounds good.

Laura: Thank you.

Matt: All right, thanks Michelle.

Laura: Bye Michelle.

Matt: Bye.

Michelle: Bye.

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