Eleven Classroom Creativity Killers
Marvin Bartel - © 2001, updated Apri 3, 2013

**". . creativity scores had been steadily rising. . .until 1990. Since then,
creativity scores have consistently inched downward."**
from: Bronson, Po & Merryman, Ashley. "The Creativity Crisis."  *Newsweek, July 10, 2010*, retrieved July 27, 2010
from <http://www.newsweek.com/2010/07/10/the-creativity-crisis.html>

**PROLOG**: Many teachers still assume that creativity is innate and random. They believe that some people are struck by it, or maybe they have a special gene. Teachers are seldom taught how to teach creativity, but a few teachers have a 'gift' for it..

Before the industrial revolution, work and creativity was woven into the fabric of everyday life. During the industrial age, only a few elite innovators were needed to keep things going. Most jobs just required routine tasks from dawn to dusk. Middle management could learn standard procedures in college. Universal pubic education was developed to prepare workers with basic knowledge and some making skills. In post-industrial times, work is again being woven into everyday life. Creativity plays a larger role than ever before for the average person, but schools are teaching less creativity.

Will universal pubic schools fade away like shop classes at the end of industrial life, or will they transform themselves into a new life form to meet new needs? Through all this, education in the visual arts has developed and retained a subset of educators who have gone against the dominant current of predetermined concrete knowledge and skill standards. Art is a process. It is a search. Art depends more on questions than on answers. Therefore, we have paid attention to learning that molds the mind's thinking habits in the direction of creativity.

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| **Introduction** This is my confessional as a teacher. Most of what I learn in art and in teaching is direct result of mistakes I make. I become aware of problems after something happens. I get into habits that are hard to break. It is hard for me to see an issue until it presents itself in the form of failure. Every student is different, so teaching is never an exact science. I am tempted to be pleased if a few of my students do well | It is when I wonder why some do poorly, that I keep trying something different. It is when I wonder why some fail to enjoy what seems like so much fun for others, that I question what I am doing. Some of these points are 180 degrees from where I was when I started teaching art. Some are direct opposite the ways I was taught. --mb --- also see [footnotes](http://www.goshen.edu/art/ed/creativitykillers.html#footnotes) for more background. [about the author](http://www.goshen.edu/~marvinpb/MB_bio.htm) |

#1. I Kill Creativity when I encourage Renting (borrowing) instead of Owning ideas.

Real artwork is based on the child's own experience, memory, observation, and/or imagination. Real artwork is not borrowed from other children or other artists. The definition of borrowing is "use it and give it back". Even thieves take ownership--they do not borrow. They do not intend to return what they take. Ideas cannot be patented or copyrighted. They are free in the vapor of our lives. I stole this idea from Nick Lindsay, a good friend and poet. He is the son of poet Vachel Lindsay. When I asked him if he was ever tempted to borrow from other poets, he said, "Steal it--Don't borrow it. Make it your own." Making an idea my own means that I choose it, improve it, shake it, pound it, deconstruct it, reengineer it, materialize it, test it, internalize it, and so on. I cannot simply copy it or rent it. (also see number 5 and 10)

# 2. I Kill Creativity when I Assign Grades without providing Informative Feedback.

What is fair? What is helpful? What is motivational? What motivates creative work? Assessment without rationale gives no useful information that helps a person be creative. When we give reasons, do our criteria include credit for the originality as much as for following prescribed requirements? Sometimes grades punish instead of rewarding. If grading is used as punishment, it can motivate rebellion or passive resistance unless the student is unusually mature.

When grading is needed in art, it is only fair that we have a way to measure and achnowledge new learning. How can we use an accumulation of positive points including credit for growth and improvement ([longitudinal grading](http://www.bartelart.com/arted/gradingart.html) instead of normative grading? Normative grading is based on comparison with others. It assumes that there is a certain equal norm that everybody must achieve. It would be like forcing all children to be a certain height by a certain age. Longitudinal grading looks at how much has been gained over time with practice in this class. In normative grading, a student who doubles in ability may end up lower than another student who merely repeats previous successes.

# 3. I am Killing Creativity if I see a lot of Cliché Symbols instead of Original or Observed Representation of Experience. I am Killing Creativity even more if I criticize it.

Snoopy dogs, hearts, smiley faces, stick figures, formulas for drawing trees or animals, ovals for people, and so on, are all evidence that I am killing creative thinking in my class. If I see a lot of Cliché drawing, it tells me that I have not established a classroom culture of creative thinking and a joy of learning to learn. As a student teacher, I asked my supervising teacher what he did in such situations. He said that he tried to encourage the student to do some experimentation or variation, but he would not forbid the student from including what they choose to include.

How can I encourage more imagination, better observation, and expressing what is remembered? Can I prohibit cliché production? Probably not. This is a case where two negatives do not make a positive. I have often seen engaged and inspired students producing what seems to me like trite and trivial work. However, I know that if I say anything negative about a student's choice, I inevitably kill off any spark of creativity or passion. I have never found that my criticism of a student's choice leads to more creativity in their artwork.

When I see what appears to be trite trivia, what if I begin with an affirmation of the engagement and enthusiasm. What if I then show interest by asking sincere, but open-ended [questions](http://www.bartelart.com/arted/questions.html) to help me learn more about the student's concerns and interests? I may come to understand why the student is so interested in this content. Could this help me think of a way to engage the student's thinking that builds on the student's passions instead of making suggestions or being critical based on my preconceived ideas of creativity? As a coach, I am not there to be faultfinding. I am there to facilitate creative strategies.

What if we start class sessions with a class warmup of innovation practice, [observation practice,](http://www.goshen.edu/art/ed/ritual.html) or short [experiments](http://www.goshen.edu/~marvinpb/arted/clay-assemblage.html)? What if we begin with fun making color discoveries instead of "teaching" principles and color mixing as facts? Can more of our homework consist of idea books, journals, sketchbooks, question-lists, diaries, reflections, illustrated experiences, and so on that can be turned into future class projects that come from student choices?

We all know that a heart stands for love. How many other symbols could an art class list that could also represent love? Would it make a difference if the class session started with this activity rather than starting without any idea-generation activity before making valentine cards? What if class starts with a game where teams competed to generate diverse lists or sketches to represent a feeling like love? Teams with the longest lists and/or the most unique ideas would be the winners of the game.

# 4. I Kill Creativity when I Demonstrate instead of having students do Hand-On Practice.

I can sleep through a demonstration. I cannot sleep through a hands-on practice lesson. **Tell me** and I might remember a little while - if I listen. **Show me** and I will remember a bit longer - if I pay attention. **Have me do it** - I learn it. When I demonstrate, I still get quite a few questions about what I "taught". [Students need to do the demo for themselves.](http://www.bartelart.com/arted/do-it.html) When I direct a practice session nearly everybody feels confident to do it again using their own ideas. If a demo is the only way, I find that it needs to be immediately followed by practice, not by the final product assignment. A demonstration can cause the aborting of imagined ideas before they are born. It implies a "right" way. I never see what a student might have imagined had I not provided the "right" way. During the practice time, many students are beginning to wonder how this process or technique might be made into something that they want to make. Since there is no demonstrated model to copy, other than their own beginning efforts, their experimentation and comparisons help refine these ideas.

# 5. I Kill Creativity when I Show an Example instead of Defining a Problem.

I like to show the Art History, the Fine Art Exemplar, the multicultural examples at the end of the lesson. This allows us to use what we learn during the media work experience as frame of reference for the example. However, when not showing examples prior to media work, I must provide a better problem definition, more chances to practice the technique, and be particularly alert to students who may be floundering at the beginning of a problem because they are not accustomed to doing their own thinking. Sometimes we have to repeat the practice a few times until everybody understands how to practice a new skill that can help them be creative.

When not showing an example, I must give students time for their subconscious mind to operate. This might mean that we discuss assignment issues and conduct practice sessions on one day and come back to the same problem on another day. Many students forget what is learned, so I ask questions to let them know that it is good to remember what is learned so it can be used again next time.

Often, if students are not accustomed to listening carefully, they feel lost if I do not show them what it is supposed to look like. In these cases, I repeat the problem definition using different words, or I have them make ome sketches of what they think might work. I also have them make written lists of ideas to pick from. Some are not accustomed to sketching and thumbnailing. They are not used to the idea that they are to originate ideas from their own lives, experiences, and concerns. Other teachers may not ask this of them. When I do not show them the answers, they may need help in learning how creative people develop ideas for their work. It can mean that we start thinking about things several weeks in advance. A future challenge can be presented long before the actual production so the subconscious mind can be focused on it. Creative people generally have several projects going on simultaneously at different stages of development. Creative minds, once unleashed, continue to work while we sleep.

While "image flooding" (showing many examples) may be inspirational, it can also be intimidating and very suggestive. It can be argued that "image flooding" creates slicker work, but less creative thinking skills. It may win the scholastic awards, but it teaches us to go through life in other people's skins. We never learn the ecstasy of having original ideas. Also see #10 below and #1 above.

# 6. I Kill Creativity when I Praise Neatness and Conformity more than Expressive Original work

Neatness is over rated. Conformity (and even following the assignment too slavishly) may be a negative indicator when assessing art. I believe that product centered education makes very good slave training. What I want is student ownership. I often imagine what it might be like to be one of those artists cranking out "Starving Artist" oil paintings. They are done in painting factories. In any list of grading criteria, originality must have more importance than neatness. Neatness is style--not substance. As a style, neatness can get some credit, but other styles that are well executed without showing neatness need to get just as much credit.

# 7. I Kill Creativity when I encourage Freedom without Focus

If I ask students to do whatever they want to do, they often avoid risk by doing something they already have learned in the past. The amount of creative thinking may be zero. When there are **limits**, there is a better chance of having a challenging task. We have to require limits on mindless repetition of past success. We have to encourage new and creative problem solving. The teacher's challenge is to make the limits seem compelling and interesting to the student. Good lessons ask questions, provide learning goals, reasonable objectives, and so on. As a teacher, my job is to make the easy challenging and to make the hard stuff accessible.

Contrary to some common assumptions, it is often better for the students themselves to set the limits and the focus, so long as they understand that they go beyond simple repetition of a previous success. Repetition with focused variation is an excellent way to make qualitative comparisons. However, easy repetition and self copying needs to be limited.

In teaching methods, we also benefit from self-imposed limits that force us to move beyond our self-copying and past successes. If I have been routinely teaching something with a demonstration, it can be very creative for me to come up with a way for students to learn the same thing with hands-on experiences that I have them do as a warm-up or preliminary practice routine. If I have routinely been teaching by showing examples, it can be very creative for me to come up with alternatives that use questions, experiments, preliminary sketches, and list making instead of me showing visual answers (examples).

Students of nearly any age can learn to give themselves limits and assignments to learn new things. We need to cultivate classroom culture where the benefits and rewards of creative expectations are learned. I want there to be student choices that require genuine thinking and decision-making. I must find ways that discourage choices to opt out of thinking, discoveries, problem solving methods, and new growth. Affirmations of clumsy efforts can be stated in ways that encourage new efforts, but also encourage continued experimentation and practice to improve the product quality along with innovative experimentation. Slick technical work can be affirmed along with a challenge to move into another variation or even an opposite direction to see if it becomes more evocative and compelling.

A creative classroom culture needs focus outside conventional content goals. A creative classroom environment must include experimentation. Modification of expectations becomes the norm. Entrenched habits of thinking and working are questioned. In the end, I hope students choose to work this way on their own. While limits that require change can insure that students are challenged, if students do not see the purpose of it, a teacher's limits often are seen as boring external requirements. This is helped by student choice in certain aspects of every creative project. Student choice provides for autonomy and ownership.

By the end of a semester we need to move to a culture beyond mere choice to a culture of self-challenging choice. Self-directed focus is the ideal. In art class, the [rubrics](http://www.goshen.edu/art/ed/rubric2.html) and [critiques](http://bartelart.com/arted/critique08.html) can help to actively move students in the direction of self-planning for creative thinking. Even rubrics and critiques can be constructed by using student responses to open-ended questions.

While we may be tempted to plan on the basis of content standards, this can calcify thinking processes and kill creativity. The most important standards should be thinking and working habits that in the end will produce the most self-learning. This is helped by including self-challenge, self-learning choices, and enough difficulty to get practice in persistence in the search for better answers and stronger artwork. Students themselves need to understand the benefits of self-assigned challenges.

# 8. I Kill Creativity by Making Suggestions instead of asking Open Questions.

Too often I am so glad I have what seems like an intelligent suggestion that I blurt it out without thinking. When I do this I am taking away several important things. I make my students less self-reliant and more dependent on me. I teach them not to think for themselves. Would it not be better to bite my tongue - to pause long enough to phrase a question or two that helps students realize that what **they** think is important. I can often simplify the problem by asking them to solve a smaller problem that helps with the larger question.

**My Open Questions** - What would happen if I would ask those who observe my teaching to help me overcome my tendency to give answers? How could I be teaching thinking and self-empowerment? Could I ask students do this for me? What if my students learning to be teachers, when observing other teachers giving an answers, would jot down ways to revise these events into empowering teaching moments (instead of spoon feeding students with suggestions)? Hmm, how could I have stated these questions better? How might I replace my suggestions in this list of 10 creativity killers with better questions that would motivate your experiments?

# 9. I Kill Creativity if I Give an Answer instead of teaching Problem Solving experimentation methods.

How can I help students learn to set up experiments to find answers? What are problem solving strategies used by artists? Some move things around until they look "right". Some know that they need to simplify. Some need to work at creating new kinds of order from chaos. Some want to point out the problems of the world. Others want to solve them. Some want to search for more perfect beauty. Still other artists use intentional accidents (often a series of accidents). They find ideas in the accidents that are impossible to discover by force of will?

There are many experimental methods of working aesthetically. How can I get students to practice using as many experimental methods as possible and get them to invent new methods of invention? It is not my job to answer the students' questions. It is my calling to encourage the students to learn how to formulate questions that they find compelling. It is my job to make sure they learn to devise ways to test their ideas experimentally. In this sense we are teaching both science and art--truth and beauty.

#10. I kill creativity when I protect students from making mistakes.

In ceramics class students often tell me their new idea or ask about something they have never tried. They ask me if it will work. Often it is something that I have tried and it failed. When something fails, I often experiment with alternative ways to do it. Should I tell the student what happened? Should a teacher explain?

In other situations students ask about something I have never tried. Often, I can guess what will happen and why it will happen. How much should I tell and/or ask them? If there may be a hazard involved, I would raise some open questions to make the student aware and thoughtful for their own safety and that of others. I have observed that students who learn question-forming are better able to imagine future scenarios. This can also help with creativity. I may be killing creativity if a fail to model the good use of open questions because imagining of future scenarios is a very creative thing to do.

Unless there is a safety hazard involved, I now believe it could be better not to tell them my discoveries before they try it, but for some students who are too impulsive, it may be good to model the skill of asking good open questions. We know that making mistakes is discouraging, but we also know that highly creative people have overcome many mistakes. We know they are learning that their mistakes actually feed their idea bank. Some mistakes show us new ideas that we would never think of otherwise. When we learn that persistence is rewarding, we become more creative. Grit is a key trait of creative people.

I think it is important to encourage and support students when a mistake happens to be sure they persist. They need to experience the rewards of unexpected outcomes, experimentation, discoveries, and persistence. A host of world-changing discoveries started as mistakes. Check serendipty in Wikipedia. It lists many very creative discoveries. By preventing mistakes, I may be preventing future Einsteins.

[Sare Blakely,](http://www.forbes.com/sites/clareoconnor/2012/03/07/undercover-billionaire-sara-blakely-joins-the-rich-list-thanks-to-spanx/) America's youngest self-made billionaire woman inventer, expained that while growing up, [her father routinely asked](http://www.spanx.com/category/index.jsp?categoryId=12770782) her and her brother to tell about a mistake they had made. Malcolm Gladwell, in "[The Physical Genius](http://www.gladwell.com/1999/1999_08_02_a_genius.htm)" tells how doctors are screened before being admitted to neuro-surgery training. The best candidates are those who say, " 'I make mistakes all the time. There was this horrible thing that happened just yesterday and here's what it was.' They were the best. They had the ability to rethink everything that they'd done and imagine how they might have done it differently." On the other hand, the candidates who claimed that they could not recall thier own mistakes could not be admitted to the profession because they turned out to be failures. Nothing else was found to be a good predictor of success as a brain surgeon.
(Gladwell quote retrived, 4/3/2013) http://www.gladwell.com/1999/1999\_08\_02\_a\_genius.htm
(Blakely interview and Forbes article retrieved, 4/3/2013)
http://www.spanx.com/category/index.jsp?categoryId=12770782
http://www.forbes.com/sites/clareoconnor/2012/03/07/undercover-billionaire-sara-blakely-joins-the-rich-list-thanks-to-spanx/

#11. I Kill Creativity if I allow students to copy other artists rather than learning to read their minds.

We know that artists look at and that they are influenced by the work of other artists (as well as everything else in their lives). How can we respond creatively to outstanding works by other artists? How do we learn to stand on their shoulders rather than gather their crumbs? How can we use their expertise to surpass them, or at least do for our time what they did for their time? Is not the apprentice system based on mastering the work of previous experts?

I am concluding this list of creativity killers with some ways to think about the apprentice system of teaching and learning. In #5 above I say that I kill creativity if I show examples before students have developed their own concepts of what might go into a significant creative effort. When not showing examples, we have to practice other ways to generate ideas. In #1 above I say it is better to steal, rather than borrow ideas. To really be creative with an idea, one has to believe it and own it.

The question is not simply: What can we learn from? The question is, what did Picasso learn that allowed him to surpass his artist father? The question is not simply: What we can learn from Rembrandt? It is, how did Rembrandt learn to surpass his teachers. What must we surmise about how the greatest artists became creative? I am guessing that the most creative artists learned much more than technical expertise from their progenitors.

In the tradition of the apprentice system, many assume that the apprentice learns by copying the techniques and looking at the master's finished products. Some of this happens. However, what may not be nearly as obvious is that particularly creative apprentices are also apprenticing (or even surpassing) the master's idea generation process. The creative apprentice copies the master's best thinking methods, idea building sequences, questioning processes, warm-up routines, practice routines, habits of work, and so on.

When I was a student teacher I apprenticed with two master teachers with many years as successful art teaching. From Mr. Nelson, I learned ways to being a personable and helpful person, but eventually abandoned many of his other ways of presenting lessons. From Mrs. Wolfe, I learned some very effective ways to get students to generate ideas for their own work, but I have had to work to abandon some of her personality traits.

Today, formal education has replaced the apprentice system. As a teacher, I used to start a new course by showing slides of great works of art in the area the students were expected to learn. I now start the course with warm-ups that require skill building and with idea generation activities. They learn good practice methods to build confidence and make things easier to do. New students get warm-ups that are easy enough to avoid frustration and hard enough so they feel they are learning and becoming prepared and skilled enough to be creative. This is accompanied by questions to be answered with art materials. The questions focus the thinking and the practice suggests ways to materialize answers to the questions.

Often students expect and ask to see examples. I assure them that we will be studying great exemplars as we begin to understand and experience how it feels to materialize work ourselves. I explain that I look at lots of great art so that I know what I do **not** need to do (it has already been done). I explain that when I look at great art, I see a reflection of another person and/or another time and/or culture. I do not see work that needs to be done today by me and in my situation.

I also tell students that I apprentice at great work to analyze the motivations behind the work--not to find something that I can visually mimic. I explain that I apprentice with important artworks in order to learn to read and understand the mind and heart of artists, but not to copy the look of their work. I speculate on why it may have been made. If I had made it, what would it have looked like? I never conclude that my work should look like what I am looking at. Copying is not a reasonable option. When viewing art this way, it can inspire and give me the courage to create something in my life that I need to express.

Artwork is great because it was made for a reason deeply felt by the artist. Of course apprenticing with exemplars in this way often requires some understanding of context--not merely surface appraisal. This is a reason to delay showing work until students are minimally familiar and confident in their own creativity.

By showing exemplars of great work **after** some student creative experience, I want the student to see validation of their own inventions and yet be inspired to come back again and again knowing that there are more ways to think, to question, and develop the same themes. First impressions are important and unforgettable. I want students' first impression of art making to come out of **themselves**---not from another artist. To show examples before the work is wrong because it cultivates an art studio culture of dependence on experts.

By showing exemplars of great work after they have done their own work, I hope students will respond by moving beyond the exemplars by "stealing" thinking processes to make their own work---never copying or borrowing the look or style of the work. The thinking processes are taken (copied) to strengthen and express their own discoveries and experiences more fully. Learning to use art models creatively means learning to search for the hidden creative strategies and motivations under and behind the art works. No master artist outside of ourselves can do this for us. We have to learn to see the masterwork in ways that inspire and activate our minds. Copying the mere look of the work kills creativity because it does not include this thinking and speculation process. Because copying replicates answers, it is a shortcut that eliminates questions. It teaches dependency--not creativity. One should copy the questions that you imagine an artist worked with--not the answers (the artwork). Even if you imagine totally wrong questions, the questions can produce a lot of creative thinking.

"He who receives an idea from me, receives instruction himself without lessoning mine; as he who lights his taper at mine, receives light without darkening me." --Thomas Jefferson

This quotation was found in an essay be Johathan Lethem, "The Ecstasy of Influence: A Plagiarism" from *Harpers Magazine.* February, 2007. Retrieved July 27, 2010 at: <http://harpers.org/archive/2007/02/0081387>

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