Prospector Leading the Search for Creative Educational Gold: An Interview With Ronald A. Beghetto

Suzanna E. Henshon

Dr. Ronald Beghetto is an international expert on creativity in educational settings. He serves as Associate Professor of Educational Psychology in the Neag School of Education at the University of Connecticut. Prior to joining the faculty at UConn, Dr. Beghetto served as the College of Education’s Associate Dean for Academic Affairs and Associate Professor of Education Studies at the University of Oregon.

His research focuses on infusing creativity in teaching and learning and he has extensive experience providing professional development to teachers and instructional leaders in an effort to help them develop new and transformative possibilities for classroom teaching, learning, and assessment in K–12 and higher education settings. He has published numerous books, scholarly articles, and book chapters on creativity and education.

Dr. Beghetto is the Editor-in-Chief for the Journal of Creative Behavior and serves on the editorial board for several creativity and education journals. He is a Fellow of the American Psychological Association and the Society for the Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts (Div. 10, APA). Dr. Beghetto has received numerous awards for excellence in research and teaching. In Spring 2006 he received the University of Oregon’s highest teaching award for early career faculty (Ersted Crystal Apple Award).

Dr. Beghetto can be reached via e-mail at ronald.beghetto@uconn.edu and more information about his work can be found on his website: www.ronaldbeghetto.com

Henshon: What led you to study creativity, especially in educational settings?

Beghetto: My interest in creativity in educational settings has its genesis in two early experiences. As a young child, I grew up with the creative process. Some of my most vivid (and painful) memories involve watching my dad, a jeweler and inventor, share new ideas and prototypes with extended family members. His ideas were often dismissed and on several occasions openly mocked. He stopped sharing his ideas and prototypes with people outside our immediate household (even though he had published several patents for some of his earlier ideas). I often wonder what would have happened to some of those ideas if my dad received more attention and encouragement from those family members. What if he had access to external guides or creative advocates who could have helped him refine and carry those ideas forward?

A second influence comes from my early experiences as a classroom teacher. My first teaching assignment was teaching eighth grade. I tried many ways of infusing creativity into teaching, but I increasingly felt like I was running out of ideas, time, and energy. I used to believe that academic subject matter and creativity were in competition with each other and started to feel myself drifting toward an instructional approach that made it more and more difficult to make room for creativity in my classroom. Around that same time, I was asked by a small group of students to serve as the coach for their Odyssey of the Mind (OM) team. My brief experience with the OM program is still salient. The program required me to approach teaching in a different way—supporting students in taking intellectual risks and creative thinking. As a result, I observed deeper levels of student engagement, interest, and understanding than was otherwise noted in my regular classroom. These early experiences left me questioning why nurturing intellectual risk-taking and creative thinking wasn’t more central to my own and other classroom teachers’ pedagogy. The questions that emerged from these two experiences have served as a driving force in my scholarly agenda.
Henshon: Last year you published a notable book titled Killing Ideas Softly: The Promise and Perils of Creativity in the Classroom (Beghetto, 2013). Can you tell us something about this project?

Beghetto: Killing Ideas Softly represents the culmination of more than a decade of work examining opportunities and barriers to nurturing creativity in K–12 and college classrooms. In the book, I endeavor to be respectful of the realities of teaching and learning and, at the same time, challenge all of us who are parents, teachers, and coaches to be more aware of how we sometimes inadvertently suppress students and our own creativity. A central theme of the book is how children’s creative aspirations can slowly die in the context of everyday schools and classrooms. In some instances, this process is neither slow nor gentle. I call such cases creative mortification.

Creative mortification refers to the loss of one’s willingness to pursue a particular creative aspiration following a negative performance outcome (Beghetto, 2014). It can occur in a single, brief instance—resulting from a throw-away or even well-intended comment of a parent, teacher, or coach. For the person experiencing it, however, it is has a devastating negative impact. As a result, the aspiring poet sets the pen down, never to pick it up again. The aspiring scientist gives up her dreams of running her own lab. And the aspiring dancer hangs up his shoes for the last time. Why does this happen?

One reason it seems is because the thought of writing another poem, stepping on the dance floor again, or pursuing the dream to be a scientist is too painful and viewed as an exercise in futility. The experience of shame and the resulting self-belief that improvement is no longer possible seem to be the two major factors that drive creative mortification (Beghetto, 2014). Importantly, however, not everyone who experiences negative performance outcomes will experience creative mortification. Some, in fact, are motivated by the experience. The difference, it seems, is that although they might experience negative emotions (like disappointment and anger), they still believe that improvement is possible and often what to prove the “naysayers” or themselves wrong.

A goal of the book, therefore, is to help those who routinely provide feedback to youngsters to become aware of this phenomenon and balance their honest feedback with concrete suggestions for how aspiring creators might improve (even if this involves helping youngsters adjust their more proximal goals). I argue that the benefits of having a creative outlet in one’s life—such as continuing to write poetry even though it may never get published—is better than never writing another poem or constantly revisiting the painful question of “What could have been?”

The book is, thankfully, not all doom and gloom. In fact, another important message I attempt to convey is: Creativity can’t really die. As long as there is life, there is creativity.

A key message of this book (and most of my work) is that there are simple, slight adjustments that any teacher can make to their existing practices to help ensure that they and students can infuse creativity into their learning and lives. I provide numerous ideas, examples, and suggestions for helping teachers incorporate creativity into their everyday teaching practices.

Henshon: You are writing a very interesting chapter for a forthcoming book on the ways in which globalization is influencing creative intelligence. Please tell us a little about the perspective you are taking in your chapter titled, “Leveraging Micro-Opportunities to Address Macroproblems: Toward Cultivating an Unshakeable Sense of Possibility Thinking.”

Beghetto: I’m taking a microperspective in this chapter as I tend to do when suggesting a starting point for taking action. This may seem a bit paradoxical (or even naïve) given the kinds of 21st-century global challenges facing current and future generations of young people. However, I firmly believe that big problems do not always or entirely necessitate equally big solutions. In fact, when we believe big solutions are necessary it becomes too easy to abdicate our personal responsibilities and do nothing at all. It is always easier when confronted with daunting problems to defer responsibility to a mythical group of “intellectual superheroes” who will magically appear and save the day.

As I explain in the chapter, the ironic aspect of life in the modern digitized and globalized age is that the spatial borders have shrunk and macrochallenges have become personalized and quite literally placed in the palms of our hands. In this way, macroproblems represent an individual opportunity and collective responsibility to think and act in new ways. What if we tried to do something about this on an everyday microscale? What if we capitalized on the opportunities presented in the everyday curriculum to cultivate an unshakeable sense of possibility thinking (UPT) in teachers and students? I attempt to address these questions by demonstrating how fostering UPT can go a long way in helping us fulfill our collective responsibility. In the chapter, I introduce the concept of UPT and describe it as a combination of possibility thinking (Craft, 2015) and a special form of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997).

I also describe UPT as a habit of mind that develops from experiencing and observing challenges, setbacks, and longstanding problems with a spirit of possibility. I explain how UPT, like all efficacy beliefs, accrues over time and can develop from slight adjustments in how students and teachers approach academic subject matter. I further argue that doing so will help students and teachers put academic subject matter to meaningful work and develop an orientation toward problem solving (even the most daunting of problems) with a persistent sense of possibility. I close by making the argument that attempting to cultivate UPT in everyday schools
and classrooms is a low-cost experiment (as it doesn’t require radical change) but one that has the potential to pay off in unimaginably large ways.

Henshon: Please give us one or two pieces of advice about how educators can nurture creativity.

Beghetto: I always remind people who ask for advice that I’m not the kind of doctor who gives prescriptions. That said, I do have a few suggestions for how educators can nurture creativity.

Creativity Thrives in Academic Constraints: Creativity and academic learning are sometimes seen as incompatible goals. With increased standardization, such as the Common Core, parents and teachers may increasingly worry that there is little room left for creative teaching and learning or, conversely, that creative teaching and learning will take away from rigorous academic learning. It is true that creativity and academic learning can be viewed in competition with each other. As I mentioned earlier, when I started teaching I believed that they were incompatible goals. As I learned more about creativity, however, I quickly recognized that this view resulted from overly narrow conceptions of creativity and learning. Indeed, current thinking on creativity and academic learning suggests that taking a both/and approach is not only possible but likely will lead to deeper and more engaging learning. My colleagues and I attempt to demonstrate such an approach in our new book, *Teaching for Creativity in the Common Core Classroom*, published by Teachers College Press (Beghetto, Kaufman, & Baer, 2015).

The take-home message of our book is that content standards can provide the structure and context necessary for creative expression and creative expression can provide the engagement necessary for breathing life and deep learning into content standards. We provide numerous examples in the book of how this might be accomplished.

Model Creativity in Everyday Teaching and Life: I always try to remind myself and others interested in nurturing creativity in our students or own children that it starts with us. It is easy to focus so much on trying to support the creativity of others that we forget about the need to model and demonstrate our own creativity. Indeed, how can we expect our students and children to demonstrate the kinds of intellectual risk-taking and possibility thinking necessary for creativity if we are not willing to do so ourselves? I really believe that some of the most important moments for nurturing (or suppressing) creativity arise in how we respond to the unplanned micromoments of everyday teaching and life. These are defining moments. They clearly communicate to our students and our own children what we really value (regardless of the slogans we hang on our walls or the values we espouse). If we demonstrate possibility thinking and sensible risk-taking in these unscripted moments, then our students and children are more likely to understand how, when, and why they might employ similar thoughts and behaviors. This, of course, is often easier said than done (something that can also be discussed with young people). Still, if we make a good-faith effort to reclaim and model our own creativity in the moments that most necessitate it, then I think we will make great strides in establishing an environment that encourages and supports our students’ creative expression.

Henshon: You’ve been invited to lecture around the world. Can you tell us what you’ve learned from these experiences?

Beghetto: I’ve learned that although each country has its own unique set of social, cultural, and historical factors that impinge on local school and classroom contexts, many educators from around the world are grappling with similar concerns when it comes to creativity. They tend to value creativity and also tend to raise serious concerns that the educational practices in their country might be undermining students’ (and teachers’) creative potential. When I presented at the 2014 WISE conference, for instance, the results of an informal survey of global participants indicated that 65% believed that “schools kill creativity.” I find these results troubling.

Not only do I view such beliefs as hyperbolic, I’m also concerned about the outcomes of such beliefs. As I’ve discussed, such beliefs are overstated. Schools can’t kill creativity. They can create conditions that suppress it, but there is always an opportunity to express and reclaim one’s creativity. My deeper concern is that such claims will place unfair blame on teachers and can pave the way for creativity mandates. The last thing we need is a *No Child Left Uncreative* policy. As ridiculous as this may seem, the combination of valuing something but fearing that it is being taken away makes for a powerful motivator. This can result in policies and practices that have the unintended outcome of further undermining creative teaching and learning. One such outcome might be requiring teachers to adopt some “ready-made” creativity enhancement curricula or techniques, rather than develop the understanding necessary to develop their own “tailor-made” techniques, which would better accommodate the unique constraints and particular opportunities of their classroom context.

These global experiences have also reinforced my belief that we should focus our efforts on exploring principled and context-relevant ways of infusing creativity into everyday teaching and learning. Might this lead to radically new approaches to teaching and learning? Perhaps. But, in the meantime, I believe at least some of our effort and attention would be better directed at helping educators take a more creative approach to their existing practices. Regardless of whether the teachers and students are from the massive metropolis of Beijing, China, or a tiny farming community outside of Fresno, California, most just need a bit of time, opportunity, and initial support to unleash their creative imagination on their everyday approach to teaching and learning. In cases where this has happened, they often surprise themselves and others with the results. Indeed, the levels of engagement with the subject matter they demonstrate...
and the kinds of contributions they make do not require advanced statistical techniques to detect. It hits you right between the eyes.

Henshon: Can you tell us where you are heading with your current research?

Beghetto: There are a couple areas I’m exploring in my current research. One might be characterized as “how to think and act more creatively inside the box” (i.e., the kinds of creativity necessary for thriving in existing school and classroom constraints) and the other “knowing why, when, and how to build a new box” (i.e., engaging in the kinds of possibility thinking necessary for establishing new approaches to teaching, learning, and schooling).

With respect to the first area, I’m continuing to explore how educators can make slight adjustments to their instructional practices to support their students and their own creative imagination. I’ve also expanded on this work to include the kinds of things instructional leaders can do to create a broader school climate conducive to creative teaching and learning. I’m writing a new book that examines this topic with a focus on instructional leaders titled, Small Steps, Big Wins: Reclaiming Creativity in Schools and Classrooms (under contract with Corwin Press). I’m also coediting (with James Kaufman) a revision to our book Nurturing Creativity in the Classroom (Beghetto & Kaufman, 2010) that provides various perspectives on classroom teaching titled, The Cambridge Companion to Nurturing Creativity in the Classroom (under contract with Cambridge University Press).

With respect to the second area, I’m working on several projects that endeavor to engage educators and scholars in the kinds of thinking that will help them recognize when it is time to abandon problematic educational practices, develop new possibilities, and move toward enacting those educational possibilities. One of those projects is a book I’m coediting (with Bharath Sriraman) that is a collection of essays from leading international thinkers aimed at exploring the new possibilities for creativity in education titled, Creative Contradictions in Education: Cross-Disciplinary Paradoxes and Perspectives (under contract with Springer).

Finally, I’m continuing to explore several related topics and issues, including examining how people who have experienced creative mortification might reclaim their creative interests and a project with Joseph Renzulli on how to support the infusion of imagination, creativity, and innovation into schools and classrooms.

Henshon: Can you name individuals in your field who have influenced your thinking? If yes, please explain.

Beghetto: I am a firm believer in what the philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin asserted, our ideas are half-ours and half-someone else’s. So many people have served as that “someone else” in my thinking. Occasionally, we are fortunate enough to stumble across people who make it especially easy to generate new ideas and writing projects. These are the people who quickly grasp your ideas, who are productive thinkers and writers, and who make collaborative writing projects easy and exhilarating. Those two people for me are James C. Kaufman and Jonathan Plucker.

There are also those who occasionally serve as an intellectual lifeboat. For me that person is Jane Pirrto. When I was a shiny new PhD and an untenured, assistant professor, I had a department head who came very close to dissuading me from pursuing creativity as a line of research. He informed me “creativity was dead” and that if I wanted to increase my chances of attaining tenure I better get on track with something more “mainstream” in the field of educational research. I shared this story with a small round-table of people at the American Educational Research Association. Jane Pirrto was one of those people at the table. She, without hesitation, leaned forward and informed me, “If you believe that, you’re dead.” She told me to stop wringing my hands and, instead, put them to work pursuing my intellectual passion in creativity. I don’t know if she recalls that moment, but I certainly do! It had a huge influence on my thinking from that day forward.

There are also those whose ideas and writing have shaped my thinking since my earliest formative years and those contemporaries and new colleagues who have deepened and pushed my thinking in new directions. For me those people include John Dewey, Charles S. Peirce, Lev S. Vygotsky, Frank Barron, Morris Stein, Mary Warnock, E. Paul Torrance, G. P. Guilford, Maxine Green, Robert Sternberg, Dean Simonton, Mark Runco, John Baer, Joe Renzulli, Don Ambrose, Roni-Reiter Palmon, Jeffrey Smith, Lisa Smith, Anna Craft, Yong Zhao, Keith Sawyer, Scott Barry Kaufman, and Vlad Gläveanu. There are so many more I could name, but these are the first to come to mind.

The students and teachers I’ve worked with over the years have also profoundly influenced my thinking. Teaching has served as an ideational crucible for me. I’ve learned that practicing and prospective teachers do not suffer ill-conceived educational ideas lightly. The stakes are too high for them. I’ve also learned that too many academics who write about and consult with teachers fail to put the necessary time in to learn from and with teachers. As a result, they end up wasting teachers’ time or burdening them with impractical platitudes. I’ve watched many of my pet ideas turn to ash when put to the “teacher test.” I’m therefore grateful whenever any of my ideas have been strengthened by the feedback of teachers and resulted in something that they have found useful for their own practice.

NOTE

1. Odyssey of the Mind (OM) is “an international educational program that provides creative problem-solving opportunities for students from kindergarten through college.” http://www.odysseyofthemind.com/learn_more.php
REFERENCES


AUTHOR BIO

Dr. Suzanna E. Henshon graduated from The College of William & Mary and teaches creative writing at Florida Gulf Coast University. She is the author of seven published books, including Spiders on the Ceiling, King Arthur’s Academy: Descriptive and Narrative Exercises, and Andy Lightfoot and the Time Warp. E-mail: shenshon@fgcu.edu