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*Cover Image: Dasia Gorham works on a mural at Mergenthaler Vocational Technical High School in Baltimore. The mural, which was left unfinished by a previous class and is ever-evolving, represents "love and togetherness," reminding those who pass by that "even though we are different in the way we look, speak, and act, we still strive to move, build, and grow as one entity," says Gorham. A former student of Sia Kyriakakos' at Mergenthaler* *(see p. 26).* *Gorham continues to help out at the school as an art teaching assistant. She is currently studying business management at Baltimore City Community College. Cover photo by Sia Kyriakakos.*

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Anthony Rebora

# Arts Education Today: Mission Critical

I have a vivid memory from an art class when I was in 2nd or 3rd grade. The teacher had brought in a visiting artist who was showing us a slideshow of photographs—probably her own, I now realize, but that was immaterial at the time. The photos blended realism and abstraction. They showed everyday objects—doorways, window frames, pieces of fruit—but from sideways or close-up angles, with surface shadows adding unexpected shapes and lines. The effect was that the objects looked strangely unfamiliar.

Toward the end of the presentation, the artist came to her main point. She said something to the effect of: "Seeing like an artist means seeing things in new and different ways."

This sentiment struck a chord with me, perhaps in part because my mom was (and still is) an artist. It seemed like important life information, something that could make a difference in the way you thought about and approached things. Significantly, I also remember thinking that it was strange to hear something like this in school, of all places. It seemed so different from the prevailing message conveyed in our regular classes, which was basically to follow the rules and get things right.

That visiting artist's statement has come back to me a number of times since. One time was during a lecture I attended a few years ago by Walter Isaacson, the biographer of Steve Jobs, Albert Einstein, and Leonardo da Vinci. Isaacson's thesis was that great innovations often happen at the "intersection" of the arts and sciences.[1] Honing an artistic imagination, he said, can give innovators a divergent, path-breaking perspective and add depth and meaning to the products of their thinking. It's no coincidence, to Isaacson's thinking, that Jobs' favorite class in college—one of the few he attended with regularity, apparently—was calligraphy, or that Einstein often played violin while working out his world-altering theories.

This immersion in the arts, you might say, enabled them to see things in "new and different ways."

## Deeper Learning

The relevance of this to education today is clear, I think, though often overlooked or evaded. At a time when schools (unlike in my day) are expressly striving to produce students who can solve complex problems, think critically and imaginatively, make connections, and assimilate different perspectives, the arts and other creative-learning activities can no longer be seen as expendable or haphazard add-ons. In some form, on the contrary, they are mission-critical.

The authors featured in this issue of *Educational Leadership* certainly vouch for this. While their perspectives and focal points differ—there are pieces on painting, music, theater, sketchnoting, and even creative boredom—they all present compelling, often moving stories of how the arts and related practices in schools can deepen and humanize learning and give students new ways of thinking and processing information. The artist's "habits of mind," as Linda F. Nathan points out, "encompass many of the skills that young people need to thrive in today's complex world" (p. 62).

As a number of the articles show, the arts can also provide a sanctuary from academic or community pressures, giving students critical opportunities to express themselves and discover their potential. Such opportunities can be challenging to fit into today's school schedules (and budgets). But as our authors make clear, they are essential for transformative, whole child learning. "Establishing openings in our curriculum to foster creative expression is ... a beautiful risk," Ronald A. Beghetto writes in his piece (p. 18). By this, he explains, he means it has "the potential to make a positive and lasting contribution to the lives and learning of others."

We hope this issue gives you ideas and inspiration to do just that. EL

[1]Isaacson, Walter. (2014). "Connecting the humanities and the sciences." 43rd Jefferson Lecture in the Humanities. National Endowment for the Humanities.

# Boredom

*Boredom can be a surprising component to the creative process—even in the classroom.*

**John Spencer**

In the second hour of teaching my four-hour pedagogy class on a late Thursday night, I ask my students to copyedit their blog posts. A few students seem deep in thought. However, the vast majority of these pre-service teachers look bored. While their typical body language is attentive and excited, many of the students are staring out, eyes glazed over, with scattered sighs.

I am tempted to intervene by telling a joke or story or moving on to a more exciting activity, worried about becoming a dull professor who teaches the dreaded "boring class." This has always been a challenge for me. When I first embraced project-based learning as a middle school teacher, I viewed student boredom as a pedagogical failure. The moment I noticed widespread eyes-glazing-over, I would switch activities up to make things more exciting. Students moved through projects quickly with few chances for daydreaming or mind-wandering.

However, I have grown to embrace boredom as a vital part of the creative process. So, on this particular night, I do not intervene. I am using boredom strategically. My hope is that after this tedious copyediting activity, students will experience creative breakthroughs in their project-planning process.

It feels counterintuitive, but these short stretches of boredom have the potential to boost creativity in the classroom.

We are naturally inclined to hate boredom. Timothy Wilson led a 2014 study at the University of Virginia demonstrating just how far people will go to avoid it. Participants spent 15 minutes in a room void of external stimulus (no music, no books, no phones), with the exception of a single device that could be used to administer a painful shock. Over a quarter of the participants chose to shock themselves. In other words, they chose pain over boredom (Wilson et al., 2014).

### The Upside of Boredom

But the curse of boredom is a gift to creative thinking. It's no accident that great ideas often happen when you're taking a shower or doing the dishes (two activities that you probably shouldn't do simultaneously). Einstein's greatest scientific discoveries occurred while he was working a tedious job in the patent office. William Faulkner wrote *As I Lay Dying* while working as a night supervisor at a university power plant. Science fiction author Octavia Butler wrote her most legendary works while she was a dishwasher, telemarketer, and potato chip inspector.

Furthermore, creative thinkers often use boredom strategically to improve cognition and aid in problem solving. Author Neil Gaiman begins his writing process by setting aside all distractions and deliberately making himself bored. Here's how he describes the process: