

America's best teachers get creative

May 5 2015



A study by Michigan State University scholars Danah Henriksen, right, and Punya Mishra finds that America's best teachers use their own creative interests to help students learn, such as the San Diego instructor who raps his algebra lessons. Credit: Michigan State University

While U.S. educational policy emphasizes high-stakes testing and scripted lessons, the best teachers in the business are taking creative

risks—often drawing from their own interests and hobbies—to help students learn, new research finds.

Examining the classroom practices of National Teacher of the Year winners and finalists, the study, by Michigan State University scholars, suggests successful educators aren't afraid to push the boundaries by incorporating [real world](#), cross-disciplinary themes into their lessons.

Consider the San Diego teacher who raps his algebra lessons. Or the Oregon science teacher whose students create advertisements to learn photosynthesis. Or the Iowa language arts teacher who uses musical concepts to teach Franz Kafka's complex novella "The Metamorphosis."

The study, published online in the journal *Teachers College Record*, is one of the first in-depth investigations of how exceptional [teachers](#) use creativity in the classroom.

"The best teachers are taking their own creative interests - from rap music to cooking to kickboxing - and are finding ways to incorporate these into the curriculum," said Danah Henriksen, assistant professor of educational psychology and educational technology and lead author of the study. "They're bringing together different subject matters and finding areas of connections so students can learn both in interesting ways."

America's test-driven [educational policy](#), Henriksen argues, has "impeded creativity in teaching and learning." Many teachers today struggle to balance high-stakes testing and accountability with the ability to act flexibly, independently and creatively in their classrooms.

"I think that there's a lot of fear," one of the award-winning teachers says in the study. "And when teachers are teaching in fear, they take few risks."

The findings have major implications for teaching and learning. Among the study's recommendations:

- Teachers' unique creative interests should be incorporated into classroom lessons, along with the infusion of arts and music across varied academic content.
- Teacher education programs and professional development courses should include a focus on real world, cross-disciplinary lesson plans.
- Administrators and policymakers should support opportunities for teachers to take creative and intellectual risks in their work.

Punya Mishra, study co-author and MSU professor of [educational psychology](#) and [educational technology](#), said truly creative people tend to get their creativity from outside their chosen discipline.

"If we want teachers to be creative, we need to provide them with opportunities to bring those outside interests into their professional life," said Mishra. "The point is to find what works for you. What is your passion and interest that can tie into what your students are learning? Ultimately, we teach who we are. That's the most powerful finding."

Provided by Michigan State University

Citation: America's best teachers get creative (2015, May 5) retrieved 17 July 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2015-05-america-teachers-creative.html>

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