

A Call for Creativity

Dr. Jenna LaFreniere

Background and Context

University students are commonly tasked with writing papers, delivering presentations, conducting research, and reporting results. These traditional assignment styles, though meaningful to assess students' understanding and prepare them for careers, sometimes limit students' range of experiences if instructors only follow conventional assignment practices. Instructors are often utilizing the same teaching methods they saw modeled for them in graduate school. But what if we, as instructors, tapped into something different for students when creating assignments or designing a class period? What if we asked students to stretch themselves in new ways and challenge them to find joy in the work, even as they are producing it? What if we created a classroom where students felt inspired by one another?

Carpenter and Sumiala (2021) noted that “knowledge can be understood, felt, *and* experienced,” (p. 6) and that creating something or doing something highlights how knowledge can be produced through the practice. Educators often swap out creative, arts-based assignments as students get older to focus on other skillsets. However, “in today's rapidly evolving world, fostering creativity within educational settings is essential to prepare individuals for complex global challenges” (Torrents et al., 2026, p. 1). As academia increasingly looks to identify ways instructors can help students be career-ready, supporting creative thinking should be prioritized.

Though instructors and students may understand the traditional academic paper, creative works can extend the reach of their information and findings. Arts-based research can reach a broader audience, such as policy makers or members of the community (Wang et al., 2017). Having students explain their understanding of an issue or their findings from a study through something they have created, be it a digital or physical creation, can push them to connect ideas in new ways so that they can communicate them to non-experts. Final products from arts-based research can be shared through performances, exhibitions, or artwork displays separate from or in addition to a written document (Wang et al., 2017). Instructors can work with university exhibition spaces for students' work to be displayed, and they can invite community partners to hear students present their work and dialogue with the class.

According to Wang and colleagues (2017), arts-based research studies can satiate our need for surprise and utilize methods such as photography, performance, writing poetry, drawing, or digital storytelling. As Torrents and colleagues (2026) found, support

and respect are important for students to experiment with creativity. As such, instructors should acknowledge that vulnerability plays an important role when expressing oneself through creative projects and find ways to respond to students' knowledge and understanding rather than their artistic choices alone.

At the South by Southwest EDU conference in 2026, I attended sessions focused on art, storytelling, and well-being. I believe these often walk hand-in-hand, with creative endeavors providing students with fresh outlets to think, problem-solve, or reimagine. Below are ideas from conference sessions that can easily be incorporated into the classroom. I hope these ideas inspire connections between students and a change of pace from traditional class experiences.

Conference Takeaways

Veronica Scott and Rebecca Bellingham (both of Artful Belonging Studio) presented on the ties between art and belonging. They suggested having students introduce themselves in artists. Students could say just one artist, three, or five, whatever number the instructor chooses for them. Artists can encompass musicians, painters, podcast hosts, whoever students view as artists, as long as the students communicate their personal story through what each of their selected artists does or means to them.

In the session, Scott and Bellingham also suggested having students write a poem depending on the class's content. In the poem, for instance, they could describe what someone does, what they said, what they wear, or who they are. After having some students share the poem with the class or with a neighbor, the instructor could use the poem as a scaffolding tool for understanding a larger assignment or talking through the next idea in the lecture.

Finally, session hosts Scott and Bellingham also encouraged the use of creative questions such as "what is your favorite food that tastes like summer?" to get students talking and sharing. These questions break away from traditional icebreaker questions to help students think more creatively and in fun ways wherein they are likely led to provide longer answers for description or explanation.

The idea of utilizing light and fun questions was echoed in a session led by Dr. Megan Holmes (Case Western Reserve University Center on Trauma and Adversity). Holmes noted how college students today are often coming to class in a dysregulated state, unable to focus or absorb information and think clearly. If instructors wish to create safe spaces for students to feel understood and respected, one way instructors can assist them is by creating space for them to relate with others around them. Reflective questions such as "what song best represents your mood right now?" gives students a chance to

think creatively, assess where they are at, and to connect with classmates. Maybe they like the same artist. Maybe they feel the same way and can share about their feeling in the moment, relating with the person sitting next to them. When students connect with even one other person in their class, they can begin to feel some personal responsibility to show up and continue connecting with that person, even if briefly each period.

When creating the project or assignment, Brent Hasty (MINDPOP) and Jamie Kasper's (Arts Education Partnership, Education Commission of the States) session provided a reminder that people can feel intimidated by their lack of expertise in art. Students should enjoy the process, not just do something for the final product (or the grade). Personally, I like to remind students that they are not expected to be experts in art, but they are expected to strive to create and communicate meaning through whatever it is they put together. I remind them that stick figures are welcome. Hand drawings are just as valuable as pictures cut out of magazines. I try to remove barriers to art entry for those who might be nervous.

Lastly, as my doctoral advisor, Dr. Erin Anderson-Camenzind (University of Denver) always shared in her arts-based class activities, students are not allowed to say "I'm no artist" or "I'm not good at art" when they are sharing. As instructors, we should consider how each creative activity is an opportunity to build students' confidence and self-efficacy for their future creative endeavors. As mentioned previously, finding ways to exhibit students' projects could be a nice culmination experience to celebrate, whether in the classroom where studen

References

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