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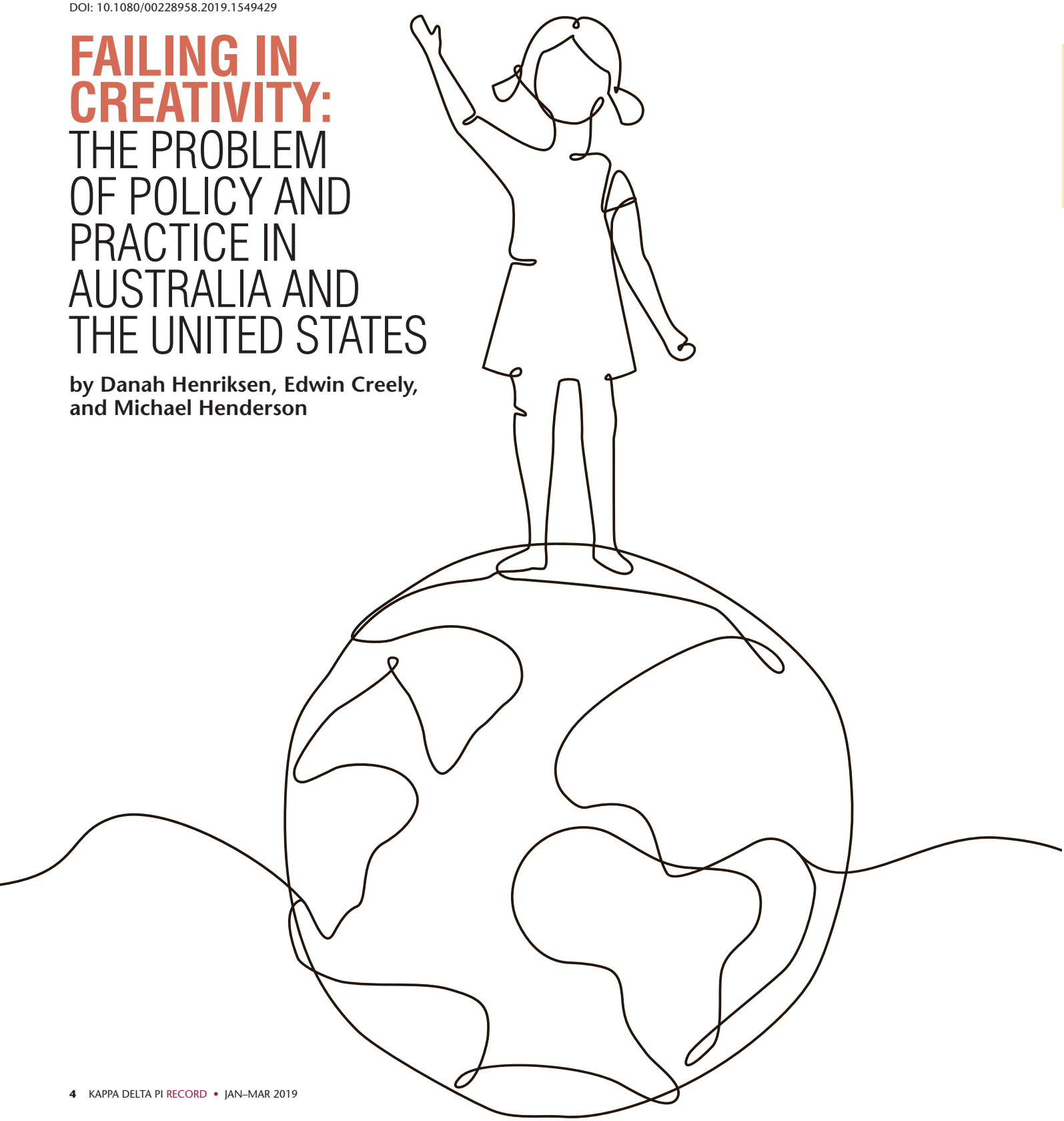
FAILING IN CREATIVITY: THE PROBLEM OF POLICY AND PRACTICE IN AUSTRALIA AND THE UNITED STATES

by Danah Henriksen, Edwin Creely, and Michael Henderson



Abstract
Considering the political environments of Australia and the United States, the authors discuss the disconnect between policy and the practical needs of educators for creativity in the classroom.
Key words: *creative practices, creativity, education policy, failure, risk*

For teachers who want to encourage creativity in their classrooms, understanding the circumstances that lead to its emergence in learning settings is key. One of these circumstances is finding spaces to build creativity through risk and failure.

In the early 20th century, British-American philosopher and astronomer Alfred North Whitehead (1978) was one of the first theorists to use the term *creativity* and to think about its emergence in artifacts, actions, and processes across contexts. He saw creativity as being linked to novelty (or newness), and he suggested that this process of forming novelty is unique and often chaotic, filled with disparate elements (which he called *entities*) that come together. This coming together he labeled as *concrescence*, which could be about material objects, ideas, or design elements. While he never used the terms *risk* and *failure* in regard to creativity, these are strongly implied in his work. Without the possibility of, and the space for, risk and failure, there can be no creativity. In forming and building on new concrescences, in risk-taking and iteration, there is an opportunity for creative success and substantial learning. These elements of risk and failure are critical for students as they develop their creative thinking skills toward becoming lifelong 21st-century learners, and also for teachers who exercise their own creative potential in designing educational experiences.

Whitehead's ideas challenge deeply rooted educational conceptions about risk and failure that view these elements negatively. In education, both for teachers and learners, they are positioned in terms of avoidance and reduced safety. Yet, risk and failure may well be pivotal to the emergence of creativity in education settings, and essential for productive creative practices.

Why Policy Is Important

There is widespread consensus that creativity is central to advancing society through the development of new ideas and insights (Zhao, 2012). It is one of the most coveted qualities of mind (Williams, 2002), and there are intellectual, educational, and emotional benefits associated with creativity for people of all ages (Blicblau & Steiner, 1998). Educational practitioners and psychologists have observed how creativity contributes to many areas of life and encompasses leadership in the workplace, strong well-being, and intellectual and emotional growth (Sternberg, 2015). Furthermore, Maslow (1962) suggested that creativity is necessary for self-actualization. In recent years, institutions like the Partnership for 21st Century Learning (2007)—a coalition of the U.S. Department of Education, business and education community leaders, policymakers, and education stakeholders—have listed creativity as one of the four Cs (among critical thinking, communication, and collaboration), or four skills most essential for the present and future.

Despite persistent myths that creativity is only for exceptional people (Starko, 2010), research has suggested that creative thinking can be taught and developed in most people (Sawyer, 2015), and thus should be supported

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>
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in schooling. However, the question remains whether educational policies actually support creativity. In education, policy drives practice and reflects the degree to which creativity is supported in many educational contexts.

In this article, we discuss education policy around creativity within two large international school systems—Australia and the United States (represented by the authors). We consider whether creativity is supported within these policy contexts, describing what this means for teachers and students. We begin by considering creativity alongside two core concepts for its implementation—risk and failure—and then whether there is space for these elements for both teachers and students.

Creativity, Risk, and Failure

Intellectual risk-taking practices, and a willingness to fail, have always been essential to creativity (Dewett, 2007). Smith and Henriksen (2016) noted that creative teaching and learning require that people are willing to risk and fail—and to reflect, regroup, integrate what they have learned, and try again. The capacity to understand failure—to wrestle with the struggles of creative practice and to develop resilience—can be an important learning outcome for students. In essence, creativity happens through iterations of failure that lead toward ultimate success and learning (Weinzimmer & McConoughey, 2012). This approach also allows students to live with uncertainty in ways that support deep learning, and teaches them to manage the kinds of ambiguity and complexity that abound in the real world.

In terms of creative teachers, Anderson (2002) reflected,

> The most fundamental risk teachers accept is found in their willingness to confront both success and failure in the interest of teaching better. They risk themselves in being responsible for their work. In this way they are not so different from creative artists in other arenas. (pp. 38–39)

Risk taking and failure are pivotal for the emergence of creativity in teaching and learning. But how often is this kind of risk taking, failure, or creative practice encouraged or even permitted in educational policy and practice, for either students or teachers?

Avoidance and anxiety about risk and failure ultimately impede creativity, growth, and learning (Smith & Henriksen, 2016). For instance, Dweck's (2006) research described two common mindsets in education: fixed and growth. In a fixed mindset, students locate their identity according to success and performance, which leads to distress and discouragement about failure, built on the idea that failure is a mistake. However, in a growth mindset, students see themselves as transformable through learning, which includes a willingness to fail in order to learn. Unfortunately, much educational policy and practice tends to cultivate a fixed mindset and is based on a belief that strong academic performance is possible only by avoiding risk and failure (Rattan, Savani, Chugh, & Dweck, 2015). Herein lies a fundamental problem for enacting creativity: Work based on innovative and creative thinking does not often immediately succeed (Martins & Terblanche, 2003). Indeed, David Kelley, creative designer at IDEO, suggested that failure is the essential ingredient of creative success (Kelley & Kelley, 2012). Without the freedom to explore lots of ideas, even risky ones or ideas that may fail at first try, students miss some of the best insights and inspirations.

Creativity, risk, and failure do not come naturally to many people. Evolutionary psychology has suggested that aversion to risk and failure is part of human history (Nicholson, 1998). At the same time, there is also a history of human growth, progress, and discovery that arises from indulging natural curiosity and being willing to take risks. In safe circumstances, this is often what people do—play, experiment, improvise, and try new things or ideas—in short, they take risks. Much early learning occurs when children explore and engage in playful trial and error, but only when it feels safe to do so (Konner, 2010). This begs the question of whether educational policy

structures support safe environments for productive mistakes, failure, and creativity for students and teachers.

Education Policy and Creativity

We next explore policy issues related to creativity, risk, and failure in our own national contexts—Australia and the United States. We describe how creativity is positioned in these national curriculum policy contexts and reflect on the implications for educational practice. We also consider how the language used in these educational policy documents suggests political and educational meanings, with implications for how these nations address important issues.

Australia

Within the F-10 section of the Australian Curriculum (AC), the online policy documents that guide individual educational and assessment policy frameworks of Australian states and territories, creativity is visible and prominent. Indeed, as stated in the General Capabilities section of the AC:

> Critical and creative thinking involves students thinking broadly and deeply using skills, behaviours and dispositions such as reason, logic, resourcefulness, imagination and innovation in all learning areas at school and in their lives beyond school. (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2018)

Students in Australian schools are expected to be creative as part of a set of seven General Capabilities that are intended to operate across school curriculum. The language appears to be positive and to promote emancipatory thinking about the potential of students. Indeed, in the context of arts education, Anderson (2014) wrote that the AC is a "massive opportunity for the creativity and imagination inherent in arts education to invigorate our schools and prepare our young people for the challenges that face them in the 21st century" (para. 4).

However, there are two concerns that emerge in these overt policy statements about creativity. The first is an issue of definition, and the second is one of how it is conceived in relation to risk and failure. The AC defined creative thinking as,

> Students learning to generate and apply new ideas in specific contexts, seeing existing situations in a new way, identifying alternative explanations, and seeing or making new links that generate a positive outcome. This includes combining parts to form something original, sifting and refining ideas to discover possibilities, constructing theories and objects, and acting on intuition. (ACARA, 2018)

Yet, throughout the rest of the 3,520 pages of the AC, creativity is discursively constructed so that it is not differentiated, but seen as a part of other complex constructs. In effect, while creativity is visible and acknowledged as important, it gets conflated with other ideas. Moreover, while teachers are expected to encourage creativity, the curriculum gives no guidance on how to distinguish it from other capabilities, or how to achieve it.

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The second issue is that the concepts of risk and failure, which are pivotal to creativity, have little place in the F-10 framework. Language analysis of the F-10 section of the AC reveals five references to the term failure, only two of which are about curriculum content. One of these instances is in the Year 5 and 6 Food and Fibre Dimensions (ACTDEK019): "Identifying the components of a service or system that contribute to its success and assessing potential risk or failure." Contextually this reference is about avoidance of risky practices, not about creative practices.

For the word *risk*, there are 75 uses across the set of documents. Most of this is about compliance to safety. One notable exception is in the Rationale for The Arts and Drama section of the F-10 Curriculum. Here it states, "They are excited by exploring their imagination and taking risks in storytelling through role and dramatic action." In the Arts policy framework, there seems to be an emphasis on risk

in a particular practice context; risk is positioned here in a more positive way, one which aligns explicitly with creativity.

The other interesting usage is in the Year 4 Personal, Social and Community Health section of the AC, which states, "Explore how success, challenge and failure strengthen identities (ACPPS033)." In this instance, the term *failure* concerns personal attributes, not creative practices and behaviors, though perhaps such personal attributes are a part of creativity or creative individuals.

It is clear that in the AC, and perhaps also in the broader educational policy landscape in Australia, creativity is emphasized and seen as desirable in schools; but there seems to be a lack of clarity about what creativity actually means for education contexts, due, in part, to the conflating of the term with other constructs and a lack of specific, grounded language about what practices actually sponsor creativity.

In addition, there is little reference to conditions, including risk and failure, that a growing body of literature is identifying as crucial for the emergence of creativity. Perhaps this reflects what Ditchburn (2012, 2015) viewed as the narrowness and conservatism of the AC. There is nothing about what creating spaces for risk might look like, and references to risk tend to emphasize risk aversion. In sum, there is an apparent disconnect between statements of policy in the AC and the practical needs in terms of creativity, risk, and failure in schools across the nation.

United States

U.S. education policy is highly federalized, with each of the 50 states having its own priorities and policies. The most adopted curricular approach is the Common Core State Standards (adopted by 45 states since 2010). These standards cover student learning expectations for K–12 grades in mathematics and English language arts (ELA). Multiple policy studies have indicated that creativity or creative thinking has little or no part in these U.S. education standards (Florida State University, 2012; Sforza, Tienken, & Kim, 2016).

In fact, the terms *creativity* and *creative thinking* appear only two times in each of the policy documents, for mathematics and ELA, in the Common Core. In the 93-page mathematics standards document, there are two mentions of creativity, both on a page that focuses on mathematical modeling, noting that it is a creative process. In the 66-page ELA document, there are only two mentions of the word *creative:* One is a passing mention of the importance of "divergent and creative perspectives" (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers [NGA & CCSSO], 2010a, p. 50); another is a single mention within the six-page introduction section to state, "Students who meet the Standards develop the skills in reading, writing, speaking, and listening that are the foundation for any creative and purposeful expression in language" (NGA & CCSSO, 2010a, p. 3). In no place is creativity or creative thinking uniquely defined or discussed beyond cursory, passing mentions.

Perhaps unsurprising, when it comes to creative risk taking and failure, there is an even stronger absence. Neither the mathematics nor the ELA Common Core State Standards mention any words or concepts around intellectual risk taking or learning through failure. Failure is never mentioned once in either document, and the word *risk* appears only once in the math standards—and there, only in the context of a mathematical subject-matter concept around "analyzing risk in situations such as extreme sports, pandemics, and terrorism" (NGA & CCSSO, 2010b, p. 72).

What we value in learning is reflected in how we assess. Because creativity is not emphasized in the standards, one can conclude that tests framed around these standards pay little attention to creativity. In scoring assessments, the main U.S. testing consortia (the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium [SBAC] and the Partnership for Readiness for College and Careers [PARCC]) have nothing in their testing items or frameworks that aims to assess creativity or position students for creative thinking. Instead, students are generally tested with one-shot, single-answer questions, with no opportunities for creativity, complexity, risk taking, or the allowance of learning via failure and iteration (Croft, Roberts, & Stenhouse, 2015).

Ravitch (2016) noted that U.S. policy focuses on testing factual knowledge by having students give single-answer responses, rather than offering generative, productive lines of thought. While simple factual questions have correct answers, and such factual knowledge can be valuable,

most real-world issues require complexity and gradations. Within U.S. policy, this "single-minded pursuit of the 'right answer' is not likely to unleash creativity, imagination, and innovation" (Ravitch, 2016, p. 294).

This type of assessment also edges out opportunities for teacher creativity. Standards for teacher knowledge and practice are determined by the U.S. accrediting body, the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP). Our examination of current CAEP (2013) standards revealed no mentions of the words *creative, creativity,* and *risk,* and, perhaps unsurprisingly, no mentions of the word *failure*—or even relevant concepts to suggest that teacher standards encourage creativity and intellectual risk taking. In fact, U.S. teachers are often indirectly punished for these stances, via threat of sanctions for poor student performance on standardized tests (Au, 2011). Even under standardization pressures, some teachers do manage to create space for what they consider "real teaching," but "sneaking in" creativity usually requires some deception (Perreault, 2000).

The lack of creativity, risk taking, and failure afforded by U.S. education policy is pervasive throughout the system. Indeed, it is difficult to uncover any evidence of policy mandates or guidelines that promote, support, or allow for creativity, let alone risk and failure.

Implications and Recommendations

Even a cursory examination of Australian and U.S. policy documents reveals that the language of policy is, at best, only tenuously linked to the needs of practice. Policy documents represent visions for what nations and systems value and seek to support in education. In cases like the United States, where the omissions are glaring and obvious, policymakers need to better align their valuation of creativity to contemporary focuses of 21st-century learning. Beyond this, in Australia, the United States, or any nations seeking to promote creativity, policymakers need to understand that mere mentions of creativity in the curriculum are not enough. Unless a concept is clear, defined, actionable, and grounded in practical ideas for teaching and learning contexts, it is of little value.

What is emphatically absent from the curriculum policy documents examined in this article is consideration of the place of risk and failure in facilitating creativity. Indeed, there appears to be no space to achieve creativity and allow for the coming together of circumstances that promote it. Policymakers must write about and embrace spaces of creativity, including those where risk and failure are valued and managed, with a nuanced and practice-focused understanding.

How, then, should educational practitioners operate in an environment where policy is not connected with contemporary needs, and practitioners have little voice in policy? First, practitioners should introduce positive risk-taking creative practices. This strategy might involve the context of drafting, rehearsal, group discussions, design work, projects, and other kinds of iterative development. In implementing this approach, problem-solving or exploratory work can be recast as forms of taking risks and seeing failure as spaces of possibility, not of deficit. Second, educators may examine their

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role and agency in the gatekeeping practices that allow "safe" risk and failure orientated to iterative practices and success-building. It is important that teachers recognize their role in gatekeeping because they may simultaneously be encouraging some forms of creativity, while rejecting others. The question is, how do they make such decisions? Some research has shown that teachers' own confidence in their curriculum and teaching allowed them to more effectively encourage students' creative risk-taking behavior (e.g., see Casminaty & Henderson, 2016).

Third, for new teachers or educators working in restrictive environments, it may help to begin slowly and build creative confidence through small steps and "safe" risk-taking practices. Here, practice can evolve by trying new things or looking for possibilities and wiggle room within the curriculum. Small steps may make a big difference over time; and keeping an eye out for potential creative tweaks and slight shifts may feel safer for teachers who are not positioned to make bold changes. Trying new things or creative approaches can begin in small ways or comfortable increments—in essence, "sneaking in" opportunities for students to take risks, safely fail, and iterate wherever an opportunity arises.

Everyday creativity is about an ongoing willingness to be open to small or interesting changes and, gradually, these small changes add up to creative confidence. Indeed, research has shown that the most effective creative teachers cultivate a personal mindset of openness and seek opportunities to put their own spin on the curriculum (Henriksen & Mishra, 2015). For instance, this technique may involve weaving in unique cross-curricular connections, finding real-world applications of ideas, and viewing all students as creative, articulate, and able to play with ideas. Classrooms can become spaces where teachers incrementally make small changes and foster creative practices through modeling, as well as allow a safe space for positive risk taking and failure.

Closing Thoughts

In this age of curriculum standardization and overt regulation of education, it is important that risk and failure are reoriented toward the positive and are not positioned as dirty words or framed in deterrent, warning language. If we allow risk and failure to be squeezed out of practice, then we are indeed failing in creativity.

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