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Education Has to Be a 'Human Business'

According to author and speaker Sir Ken Robinson, he is often asked: What would a different approach to education look like?

*Robinson, who gave the most-watched TED Talk in history (with more than 33 million views), seeks to answer this question in his latest book, *Creative Schools* (Viking Penguin), in which he shares many examples of schools that break away from the current education model into a more personalized approach to learning.*

He argues that many students are not receiving the kind of education that lives up to the economic demands of the 21st century or leads to the fulfillment of their "natural" interests—abilities that all children have, but may not retain through their lives because of the structure of the school system. The standardization of K-12 education and the public education model, with its roots in the Industrial Revolution, has all but drained creativity from schools, he says.

*We asked the speaker of the viral TED Talk "**How Schools Kill Creativity**" and the popular animated video "**Changing Education Paradigms**" (with more than 13 million views) about his thoughts on student engagement and testing, the future of teacher education programs, and why vocational education matters.*

Commentary Intern Luke Towler, joined by Commentary Editor Elizabeth Rich, conducted the interview, which has been edited for length and clarity.



—Photo by Cindy Gold

EW: Since your 2006 TED Talk on how schools kill creativity went viral, it has been seen over 33 million times. Why do you think it has resonated so strongly with viewers?

ROBINSON: It clearly resonates deeply with people, and it's because it rings true. I've been at this a long time now, and I think most people in education realize that our kids have great natural talents and interests.

For a whole variety of reasons, partly because of the way they're structured and the pressures that come on to them, schools aren't able to connect with a lot of those talents. People feel that professionally. They feel that as parents.

I get feedback from a lot of students, from families and parents, from business people, and—to me, most encouragingly—from teachers and school principals who feel that, too. I'm not pointing a finger at anyone in particular. I think it's the system itself that creates the problems.

Education Week - Sir Ken Robinson: Schools Don't Connect With Students

SOUNDCLOUD

EW: Your latest book spans case studies of schools across the country. Many schools have instituted innovative new programs to encourage their students' interests. What kind of school climate makes this kind of innovation possible?

ROBINSON: I think the key to this is that education has to be recognized as a human business. It's a personal process. We're dealing with living human beings in the middle of all of this. They're not statistics or data points. They're not data sets from a test schedule. These are living people with feelings and aspirations and hopes and ambitions and fears and talents, like you and

me and everybody else. As soon as you recognize that education is not a processing plant, it's about people, then the whole equation starts to shift around. My argument, really, is that we should be personalizing education, not standardizing it.

 Education Week – Sir Ken Robinson: Education Is About ‘People’

 SOUNDCLLOUD

EW: What do you think about the opt-out testing movement?

ROBINSON: I'm not arguing against any form of testing. I'm not arguing against any form of standardized testing. But it's really gone out of control now, and I think there's a terrible tendency to confuse standardizing with raising standards. It's always worth remembering, and I say it in the book, that this is an industry. This isn't some benign group of well-intentioned educators sitting around thinking how we can help our children. I know a lot of people in these publishing companies, and they have lives too, and, in many ways, they think they're doing their best.

But it's a bottom-line issue. This is like drilling for oil—every time there's a new standard, there's a new test. The common core is another source of revenue for these companies. It's a multibillion-dollar business that isn't regulated. So before we look at anything else, we should at least recognize that this is serving other motives from helping improve kids and engage families across the board. So, yes, I think I can understand. And if I had a kid in school right now, I think I would be opting out, too, and I can't discourage anyone from doing it.

 Education Week – Sir Ken Robinson: ‘I Would Opt Out, Too’

 SOUNDCLLOUD

EW: In an April 29 edweek.org [Global Learning](#) opinion blog post, Philip Rutherford, an expert on vocational education, explained how Australia's education system requires all of its students to take vocational education classes. In your book, you describe the divide between academic and vocational education as a caste system. What is the first step in dismantling the hierarchy of school subjects?

ROBINSON: [Career and technical education has] become demeaned largely because of the domination of education by universities. And we've reached a point now where it's too often seen as the ultimate goal of education to go do a four-year degree somewhere. And there are a lot of other ways that people can contribute and have fulfilling lives, and, in many cases, actually want to without being on this solo track to college.

I'm not trying to talk anyone out of going to college. I'm just saying there are other options. And the fact that it's not working terribly well in the [U.S. education] system is illustrated by the very low graduation rates in college when people actually get there—and by how many people, when they leave college, are unemployed or underemployed with their college degrees and how many of them don't know what to do next. In our interest in raising so-called academic standards, we've demeaned all the other options. That's my point.

So I'm not trying to say that we should abandon any interest in academic work—of course not. But we should at least give equal weight to other courses, other options, as some of the systems do, and recognize that ideas really often develop best in practice. That when you actually get people on their feet and moving around, as some of the schools do in the book, when you get people working collaboratively on practical projects, they don't suddenly abandon theory. What they're doing is looking at how ideas play out in practice, how ideas can inform practice.

So, I think part of it is to broaden the curriculum. It's to take a more practical approach to teaching and learning. And it's also important to recognize that all these things need to be assessed in appropriate ways. And design schools and arts programs and performing arts schools all have great experience in showing you can assess practical work at a high level. And how it's a much more interesting, productive, and sophisticated process than giving people a series of multiple-choice tests.

 Education Week – Sir Ken Robinson: Why Vocational Education Matters

 SOUNDCLLOUD

 Education Week – Sir Ken Robinson: Moving Beyond Formal Education

 SOUNDCLLOUD

EW: In your “Changing Education Paradigms” animation, you note that public education was based on the Industrial Revolution and the Enlightenment. This system, you said, has created chaos for many people. How can schools change from the current model into one that is less chaotic?

ROBINSON: We don't organize our days in 40-minute bits and pieces and blow whistles at home and move on to the next thing. We just do that in schools. And it gets in the way of learning very often. We don't sit people in desks all day long when they're at home and get them to fill out multiple-choice tests. We get up and do other things.

So I'm not saying it's all been terrible, but I'm saying that, on the contrary, there are wonderful schools and wonderful people that work in them. But the dominant culture has its roots in another time. It's been reinforced by this testing mania, and the system has to change, and it is changing.

It has to change because it's not serving enough children well enough. And it has to change because the world is changing so rapidly, and we need people to be educated differently now to the way we thought was suitable for industrialism.

And part of what I'm arguing in the book is that it's important to understand what the changes should be, and how they might come about. I make the point that you need firstly a diagnosis, an analysis of what the problem is. You need a vision of what a better alternative would look like. And then you need a plan to get there—to go from this to that. I think the situation in the states has been that standards have been falling in math and science and literacy. That's it.

And we have dropout rates because schools aren't very good. That's been the political analysis, it seems, from No Child Left Behind on. What we want is high standards in literacy, numeracy, and math for more people to stay in school and more people to go to college. And the way to do that is standardize everything, and test everybody. Well, I think it's a false diagnosis, and I think it's a bad strategy.


But the good news is that this system is very complicated, it's very diverse, and it does change. Beyond the control of people, all sorts of things happen in the culture that aren't planned because the mood starts to shift. And there are things which are inevitably changing in schools.

The spread of digital technology is one of them. The declining value of college degrees, the growing burden of student debt, the changing expectation of employers, general shifts in social relationships, the structure of the family—all kinds of factors are swirling around schools, and the best schools are responding to them and changing how they do things.

And what I'm arguing is that schools can change. You don't need to wait to be told to do this.

You don't need somebody's permission to do it. The book is full of examples of schools [which] are innovating within the current system. If enough schools do innovate in the system, then that gets around and more people are encouraged to do it.

But I'm not saying that this is some act of defiance. I'm saying that this changing, in the ways that we describe in the book, is to the benefit of schools, to the benefit of students, to the benefit of parents and communities, and to the country at large. This whole testing thing is largely a failed experiment. And it's time to recognize it's not delivered its promise. So can we do something else that we know works?

 Education Week – Sir Ken Robinson: 'Testing Is a Failed Experiment'



EW: Teacher education continues to get bashed in America. What needs to happen to improve teacher-preparation programs?

ROBINSON: [Teachers] need a proper professional preparation. They need to know their disciplines. They need to know about how learning works, and what we know about learning, both psychologically and socially. There's a lot to understand to be a good teacher about how people learn most effectively and why they do. And they need pedagogical skills. They need the social skills to work with complicated and diverse groups of people, and they need the pedagogical skills to know how to engage them in their material.

The heart of all of this is having a really effective program of teacher education in higher education, which works closely with the school system. So what I'm saying does have implications for how we select and train teachers, no question about it. There are clear examples of great programs across the country and clear examples of ones that aren't doing such a good job.

 Education Week – Sir Ken Robinson: How to Improve Teacher Education



EW: Do you think improving teacher education is something that would take a generation, or could be done in a faster, more efficient way?

ROBINSON: Some things happen with convulsive speed, particularly in the technological field. The Internet wasn't a big deal until about 15 years ago for most people. So it's worth remembering that most things we think are just natural features of the cultural landscape, particularly in the technological field, weren't around 10 years ago. So things can happen very quickly, like with the growth of online courses and so on.

But other things do take a long time. I talk in the book about Finland and the changes that came about there. That's been a generational shift. ... There is often now a terrible political impatience. We want this thing to be fixed right now.

But at the national level, we do need policy to mature a bit. And it's worth remembering: It's been more than 30 years since *A Nation at Risk*, and we've had almost 15 years of No Child Left Behind. In 15 years, we could be deeper in this hole, or we could be out of it. There will be a time 15 years from now, and we need to look ahead of that and say, "Well, what type of education would we like that to be?" Where do we want our children's children to be going to school? And I think if we keep that in mind, we might get on with the job more quickly.

 Education Week – Sir Ken Robinson: The Future of Teacher Education

