

Do schools really kill creativity?

Sir Ken Robinson explains to Education Today why it's time to step off the curriculum production line and cultivate some creativity

Most children are “put through school like a manufacturing line in a factory” because the education system was designed to meet the needs of a different age, according to creativity expert, Sir Ken Robinson.

Speaking from his home in Los Angeles, he told *Education Today*: “One of the problems is that the organisation of education in most countries was developed to meet the needs of an industrial economy and that’s simply not suited to the 21st century.”

He believes that, whether in the UK, Europe, the USA, Australia or Asia, school systems consistently fail to cultivate creativity and acknowledge multiple types of intelligence and are very “out-of-step with the real challenges” children are facing in an ever-changing world that has been transformed by digital technology.

“Formal education is not helping develop our young people’s ability for creative work and creative thinking, in many ways it is actually suppressing their creativity,” he stated.

“I think that creativity, as a set of ideas and a set of abilities, is of fundamental importance in the 21st century.

“We educate people in a very linear way. The whole assumption is based on a 1950s model, whereby children have to be processed in an orderly fashion through the curriculum and eventually go to university, get a good degree and then they’ll get a job for life!

“That’s just nonsense. If you combine rapidly-changing technology with increasing global populations, straining natural and financial resources, climate change and a faltering global economy, humankind is facing some of the most momentous problems in the history of the earth.”

Sir Ken said the fact that realities can change overnight, as was shown with the collapse of banks in the USA, should be added to this mix.

“The world is not static,” he says.

“It doesn’t sit still and the problem with the curriculum, especially in high schools, is it’s divided into separate subjects that are taught by specialist teachers, who often have very little opportunity to have contact with each other, and there is a hierarchy of disciplines in schools, with some given much higher status than others.”



This is partly because the content of the curriculum in all schools has been shaped by the expectation of getting a particular type of job after graduation, he says. It's one of the reasons maths, science and languages are given higher status than humanities and the arts.

To beam education into the 21st century, Sir Ken believes first, that education systems need to think differently about how the curriculum should work and should organise the content in a vastly different way.

Second, he believes that education's assessment systems need an overhaul because most are based on narrow tests and numerical grades, which are rooted in the idea of standardisation. He also feels it must be recognised that the success of a school comes down to great teaching and that many teachers have become demoralised because their own creativity is being stressed by the standardised curriculum.

Sir Ken Robinson's qualifications to champion such a radical rethink of our school systems are impressive.

Aside from honorary degrees in speech, drama and the performing arts and being the Professor Emeritus of Education at the University of Warwick in the UK, he is an internationally recognised leader in the field of the development of creativity, innovation and human resources.

His achievements range from leading a UK Government commission into creativity, education and the economy, to publishing a widely-acclaimed report on his findings, and playing a pivotal role in developing a strategy for creative and economic development as part of the Peace Process in Northern Ireland. He was one of four international advisors to the Singapore Government for its strategy to become the creative hub of South East Asia. He also has a string of awards for his services to the arts and education to his name and was knighted by Queen Elizabeth II in 2003.

Although he believes the arts are vitally important to education, he doesn't just define creativity in artistic terms. He defines it as the process of having an original idea that has value. He sees creativity as a necessary set of skills, competences and attitudes, which are essential to the future success of our children, companies and communities in the 21st century.

"The future of our economy, in every field, depends on innovation, trying to anticipate problems, the ability to solve problems and to think differently. And that's true of our personal lives too," he stressed.

"We're not just here to earn a living, obviously we need to do that, but we also need to have a life too and we need lives with purpose and meaning. To me that means discovering what your strengths and talents are and what your passions may be.

"So creative organisation to me is not just



Sir Ken Robinson says creativity is sometimes undermined by curriculum

Education systems need to think differently about how the curriculum should work

about the arts, although it certainly has major implications for the arts in schools, it's about how we teach science, maths and the humanities; it's about how we work with the school curriculum.

"The problem in education is not individual teachers, or schools or principals, although it sometimes is; it is a systemic-wide problem.

"We are locked into a 19th century model of intelligence, teaching and assessment and we need to be looking forward to a different view of intelligence and creativity."

Sir Ken also argues that students with restless minds and bodies, far from being cultivated for their energy and curiosity, are ignored or even stigmatised – with terrible consequences.

While he acknowledges the fact doctors and researchers agree some people display similar symptoms common to ADHD, he cannot believe it is becoming an epidemic among the world's young people.

"The tendency to label people to pathologies because

they are restless in formal education is a dreadful mistake," he says.

"Children are growing up in a world transformed by digital technology and they communicate, think, access information and network differently. Most school systems are still not making full use of the available technology.

"Even over the next 15 years, the changes in technology will dwarf anything we have seen so far. People are now talking about operating computers with the power of thought and are considering the feasibility of cerebral implants.

"Children who start school this year will retire in about 2070. I don't know anybody and I know many well-regarded futurists, who have the faintest idea what the world will like in 2025, let alone 2070, let alone next year."

In fact, for Sir Ken, ignoring the importance of innovation and creativity in education, the importance of new technologies and the new economic reality is plainly irresponsible and backward looking.

"I increasingly ask politicians to defend why they are handling education in the old 1950s model when it blatantly isn't working."

His latest book, now on the New York Times bestseller list: *The Element: How finding your passion changes everything* will be available in Australia in June. He will be in Australia later this year on a speaking tour.

For more information visit <http://www.sirkenrobinson.com>

