



ARTS AND MINDS

Conversations about the Arts in Education

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Education Commission
of the States

How Creativity, Education and the Arts Shape a Modern Economy

Sir Ken Robinson is a senior advisor for education policy at the Getty Foundation in Los Angeles, and a recognized expert in the development of creativity, education and training throughout the world. He has served as professor of education at Warwick University in the United Kingdom and was knighted by Queen Elizabeth II for his services to the arts. In November 2004, Sir Ken sat down with Robert (Bob) Morrison, founder and chairman of the Music for All Foundation, to talk about the current state of American education and the role creativity and the arts play in a modern economy.

This interview was conducted as part of the Education Commission of the States' (ECS) Arts and Minds Series, which features the views of today's leading thinkers on topics pertaining to the arts in education. ECS is pleased to provide this series under its 2004-06 ECS Chairman's Initiative, The Arts – A Lifetime of Learning, led by Arkansas Governor and ECS Chairman Mike Huckabee.

Bob Morrison (BM) — Thanks for being here. This is a great opportunity to put into context for a number of education officials the importance of creativity and of the arts in education in particular. In your most recent book *Out of Our Minds: Learning to be Creative* (2001, Capstone Publishing Limited), you write about the importance of creativity, not just for education, but also for companies trying to compete in an ever-changing global marketplace. Why do you see creativity as being so essential?

Ken Robinson (KR) — American companies are competing in economic circumstances that are changing

faster than ever before. In 1950, when I was born, the majority of people did manual work and only a minority did intellectual work, so to speak. Relatively few people wore suits to work and sat behind desks. The pace of technological and economic change is getting faster every day. Look at some of the casualties. In 1957, the S&P list of the top 500 corporations was first published. In 1997, 40 years later, only 74 of the original 500 were still on the list. Some experts believe that by 2020 about 75% of the S&P list will be made up of companies we don't know today, some in forms of business that haven't been invented yet.¹

Nobody has a guaranteed seat at the top anymore. They never did, of course, but the fact is if America wants to remain competitive in the global markets of the 21st century, creativity is not a luxury. America needs a workforce that is flexible, adaptable and highly creative; and it needs an education system that can develop these qualities in everyone.

BM — Are companies today having a hard time finding these types of creative employees?

KR — Yes. In 2001, McKinsey published a study called *The War for Talent*. It asked 6,000 executives from 400 companies what they considered to be their biggest challenge as they face the future.

The most important challenge they said was finding people who could make good decisions in times of uncertainty, who can adapt to new opportunities and

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¹See Foster, Richard and Sarah Kaplan. *Creative Destruction*. New York, NY: McKinsey & Company, Inc., 2001.



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respond creatively to change. Apparently they have real problems finding such people. Now these are among the top companies in America and can recruit the supposed cream of America’s education system. So even at the top end, the system isn’t keeping pace with what the economy really needs.

BM — If businesses are not finding the type of creative people they need, I would suspect they’re probably doing two things. One, they’re robbing from their competitors; and two, they are probably having to invest an enormous amount of time and money in retraining programs.

KR — That’s right. Companies are spending a lot of money trying to lure people away from other organizations. Also, they’re often reluctant to invest in training for fear that other companies will take away their people when they’re trained.

This whole approach illustrates a number of misconceptions about creativity. One is that only “special” people are creative. The assumption is that real creativity is an exceptional capacity that’s limited to people of rare ability like Martha Graham, Picasso, Einstein and celebrities. I’m convinced this view is profoundly mistaken; in reality, we are all born with tremendous creative potential.

Another misconception is that creativity is confined to certain sorts of activities, like the arts or design. The truth is we can be creative at anything that involves the active use of our intelligence. We can be creative in math, in architecture, in relationships, in science, running a business, whatever. Anything that involves the human mind is a potential source of creativity. This is why I think it’s a mistake to talk about the “creative” arts in schools and “creative arts” departments. We don’t talk about the “numerical math” department or the “objective sciences” department.

Rather than investing in these misconceptions, companies and organizations should promote the creative capacities of all their people. And as a nation, America should invest in developing creativity in the education system as a whole, because for many people that’s where the problem starts.

BM — How should we begin to address the underlying problems facing our education system?

KR — There are several ironies to face. One is that the standards agenda itself is a major constraint on

schools and teachers who want to promote students’ creative abilities. The problem is not the intention to raise standards: obviously, we should raise standards. The problem is standardization. Standardization is the enemy of innovation.

All the schools I go to, all the teachers and principals I speak to, all say the same thing. The standards movement is killing innovation because its focus is very narrow, and it’s generating a climate of fear and risk aversion. In some ways, the standards movement is actually lowering standards in the very skills and aptitudes that America really needs to promote in young people.

A second irony is that policymakers are putting these pressures on schools in the interests of improving America’s economic competitiveness. I speak a lot to corporate audiences and they mostly want the opposite of standardized employees. Given the real challenges they face in the global economies, they want people who can think for themselves, adapt and be creative.

There is a third irony. The educational reforms really needed now are actually being held back by the attitudes to education that many policymakers learned when they went to school — 20, 30 or 40 years ago. Many seem to believe the way to the future is simply to do better what we did in the past. The truth is we need to do something completely different for today’s students.

BM — It’s certainly true that when you talk to parents today, a lot of their views really are shaped by their own educational experience. And in many instances, they project onto their children their own experience, not really knowing how different things are in schools today. You talk in your book about the need for a kind of revolution. What do you mean by revolution? What do we need to do to educate differently?

KR — A revolution is when everything is turned upside down. Every social process, including education, is rooted in assumptions that people come to take for granted as just obvious and “common sense.” But the fact that something may seem obvious doesn’t make it true.

When I was at school in the 1950s and 1960s, we were told a story. It was that if we worked hard at school, went to college and got a degree, we’d find a secure job for life. It would be a good job in an office with a good

salary and a clock when we retired. That story was true then. But it isn't true now, and students in school and college know it isn't. That's why so many of them are either dropping out early or hanging on in education for as long as they can — often now into their mid-20s.

There is now a growing issue of graduate unemployment — people who leave college and can't get a job. I don't mean they can't find any kind of work. But they're not getting the kind of graduate-level jobs for which they are qualified. This isn't their fault. There is a big problem with the value of traditional academic qualifications. It's a problem of inflation.

A professional job that 20 years ago needed a college degree now requires a master's degree. A job that needed a master's degree now requires a doctoral degree. College degrees were worth a lot in the '50s and '60s because relatively few people had them. The majority of people did blue collar or heavy manual work, and only a minority went to college and had degrees. That's all changed. More and more people are now going to college and getting degrees.

There are two reasons for this expansion. The first is population growth. In the last 30 years the world population doubled from 3 billion to 6 billion. The second reason is the growth of the knowledge economy and the growing demand for intellectual labor. The combined result is that in the next 30 years, more people will qualify, through formal education and training around the world, than since the beginning of history. This is an historic change in the demand for education, and it has huge implications for the nature of it.

The fact is the education system we're all trying so hard to improve was developed in the 18th and 19th centuries to meet the needs of a different age — the age of industrialism. The people who designed the education system in America were visionaries. But, frankly, they didn't envision the situation we're facing now. They set out to meet the demands of industrialism. But America is rapidly becoming a post-industrial economy. Now we need new visionaries who can anticipate the future we face, while building on the traditions we've inherited. We need to figure out where we're going and reconfigure education accordingly.

BM — In your writings, you talk about the confusion between intelligence and academics, and the way some people view certain coursework as being more important than other coursework. Could you expand on that idea?

KR — In most school systems there is a hierarchy in the curriculum in which some subjects are evidently considered to be more important than others. At the top are languages and math and at the bottom are the arts. There isn't a school system in America that teaches the arts systematically every day, and with the same resources, as they teach languages and math. Within the arts, there's another hierarchy. Art and music are generally thought to be more important than drama and dance. Dance is usually at the bottom of the heap. That, for me, is the most emblematic point to make.

I believe children should be taught dance every day of the week just as they are taught math everyday. The fact that many people would find this an odd idea is very significant. Presumably they assume that math is "obviously" more important than dance. But is that so obvious, really? We all have bodies; we all make sense of the world kinesthetically; we relate to people physically. Dance is the art form of kinesthetic intelligence and of interpersonal space. Yet it's right at the bottom of priorities in schools, systematically passed over in favor of traditional "academics."

The arts are a low priority for two reasons. The first is economic. Traditionally, people have been steered away from arts programs because they weren't thought to be relevant to getting a job. Well, now they are highly relevant. The arts teach many of the skills, aptitudes and values that are at the heart of America's growing "creative economy" and beyond.

The second reason is intellectual. The arts have not been seen as part of the core academic mission of schools. This is because historically education has been preoccupied with a narrow and increasingly outmoded view of intelligence. Academic work is obviously very important. But it's not the whole of education, and academic ability is not the whole of intelligence.

Academic work is really about certain types of deductive reasoning, and especially some forms of verbal and mathematical reasoning. Developing these abilities is an essential part of education. But if intelligence were limited to academic ability, most of human culture would never have happened. There'd be no practical technology, business, music, art, literature, architecture, love, friendships or anything else. These are big areas to leave out of our common-sense view of intelligence and educational achievement.



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To face the future, with all its creative challenges and uncertainties, we need a refreshed conception of intelligence that recognizes we are much more than we have been led to believe by traditional academic education. All the evidence shows that if you have a broad curriculum, one that is infused with a more sophisticated conception of intelligence, kids are more motivated, more driven, have higher self-esteem and perform better academically.

BM — If, as a policymaker, I read through this and I said, “That’s a wonderful theory, fascinating stuff, but it’s not applicable to the real world,” how would you respond?

KR — It’s informed by theory, but it’s not just a theory. There’s a growing body of research to support it. For example, there’s a major problem in schools of motivating and engaging teenage students. A recent study of 20,000 teenagers found that 40% said they were under pressure from their peers not to succeed academically. Eighty percent of them said they were just marking time, trying to get through school and get out of it.

A lot of young people are not motivated in education. Give them a creative program to work on, though, and they come alive. I directed a large-scale initiative in Britain called The Arts in Schools Project. This involved about 2,000 people in 300 projects in 50 school districts over the course of four years. I also directed a project for the Council of Europe called Culture, Creativity and the Young, which involved 22 countries.

I know from these firsthand experiences that in schools where there is a genuinely creative approach to teaching and learning, and where there is a balanced curriculum, you can feel the difference in the air you breathe as you walk in the door. Students and teachers are motivated differently, test results improve, and links with the community are enhanced.

BM — Given what we’ve talked about as it relates to what businesses need to be successful and the role the arts play in unlocking individual creativity, if you were king for a day, what would be the three things you would like to see policymakers do?

KR — First, I would like them to look hard at the frameworks for the curriculum and how they are being implemented in practice. There’s evidence that arts programs are being devastated in schools and

school districts systems across America — perhaps not intentionally, but systematically nonetheless.

Second, I would want to invest in practical programs of whole-school reform. There are several models of good practice, which states can learn from. Putting the arts into schools is not like a flu shot. The benefits aren’t automatic and guaranteed. It all depends on the quality of teaching and actual provision. The arts are sophisticated processes, and it takes sophisticated techniques and adequate resources to teach them properly.

Third, I’d encourage state and federal policymakers to promote genuine and active partnerships among education, the cultural sector and the corporate sector. Arts education is too important not to involve all the main stakeholders, each of whom can bring tremendous resources to benefit students.

BM — Before we close, I’d like to ask you about the ECS initiative. Governor Huckabee has made arts education a primary focus of his agenda as ECS chairman. What steps do you see that the governor could take with this initiative to help move forward some of those ideas you’ve identified as being critical points in advancing arts education into the center of education reform?

KR — I think it’s wonderful that Governor Huckabee is leading this initiative. He’s in a powerful position to influence the public conversation about education. Legislators today have too many things to think about and not enough time to think about them. One problem is they tend to focus on what can be achieved within the life of Congress or a legislative session or before the next election.

But education reform is a long-term, not a short-term, enterprise. Governor Huckabee knows this and through his association with ECS, his initiative can directly influence the long-term thinking of three related constituencies — state governments, the national government and practitioners. ECS has a tremendous network through which to do that, not just rhetorically, but by bringing together the real evidence that arts education isn’t another problem that policymakers have to address but a solution they need to embrace.

For more information about the ECS Chairman’s Initiative on the Arts in Education, visit the ECS Web site at www.ecs.org or contact Sandra Ruppert, program director, at sruppert@ecs.org.