

# The Educator

Sir Ken Robinson has spent his life grappling with the fundamental question: what is creativity? Here, he offers *Think Quarterly* vital insights into the answer.

WORDS BY *Andrea Kurland*

ILLUSTRATION BY *Deanna Halsall*

[Sir Ken Robinson](#) has spent three decades getting to grips with the nature of creativity, since his first major work, 1982's *The Arts in Schools: Principles, Practice, and Provision* became a key text in international education. His [2006 TED Talk](#) on how schools kill creativity is the most watched in the lecture series' history, with over eight million views. There's nobody better placed to address the pleas of educators, business leaders and individuals looking for answers to the fundamental question: "Not why creativity matters, but what it is," as Robinson himself puts it.

His 2009 book, *The Element: How Finding Your Passion Changes Everything*, is a compendium of narratives in which people find their way to an occupational sweet spot where their natural talent and passions merge. Through these tales of self-discovery – told by everyone from Sir Paul McCartney to Arianna Huffington – Robinson draws an outline of creativity's true form. But the big reveal is saved for *Out of Our Minds*, a twenty-first-century survival guide first published a decade ago and now updated to reflect the rapid advance of technology. Here, Robinson posits two critical home truths: creativity is more vital than ever; yet our understanding of it has never been more blurred.

"It still amazes me how often people will say, 'Creativity in the arts', as if it's a compound noun," he explains from his Los Angeles home. "Very often people associate creativity with a particular part of an organisation. They'll think it's about design, advertising or marketing."

This is a mistake. The 'creative department' – which segregates the 'creatives' from the 'suits' – isn't just vocational apartheid, says Robinson, but a debilitating untruth. 'As anyone in the corporate world knows, it's very easy to be 'typed' early in your career,' he writes in *The Element*. 'When this happens it becomes exceedingly difficult to make the most of your other – and perhaps truer – talents.'

The inability to tap our own creative potential, whether in finance or fine art, is the culmination of a journey that, according to Robinson, starts at school. As such, he's calling for a 'learning revolution' – a radical overhaul of an industrial-era model that fails to foster, or appreciate, the full diversity of human talent. "Our education systems are facing backwards not forwards," he

says. “It’s a huge irony that people come out of education feeling less creative than they did going in.”

Failing to appreciate the true nature of creativity has wider ramifications, too. “Often the culture of organisations inhibits creativity, because to be creative requires certain things,” says Robinson. “It requires you to take risks, and if people are worried that doing something unusual will prejudice their progress through the organisation, they’ll step back. The issues are partly conceptual – misunderstandings about what this is and why it matters – and they’re partly cultural. If organisations don’t understand the dynamics of the creative process, they’ll wish for innovation to happen when the conditions for it to flourish don’t exist.”

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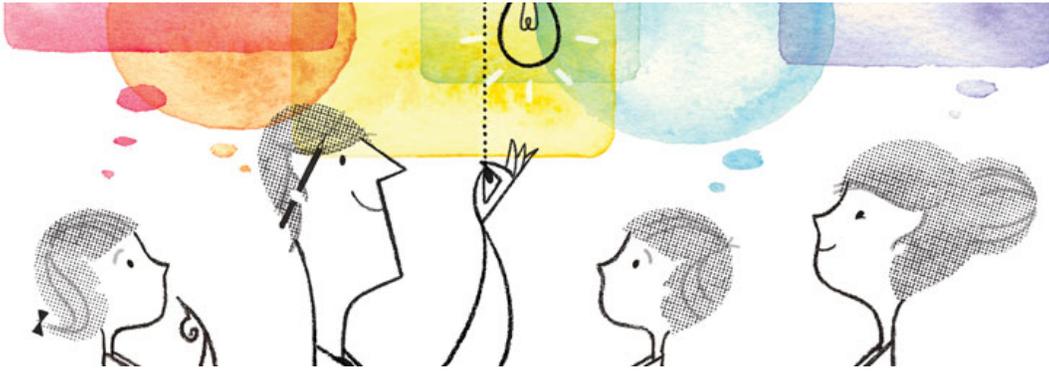
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If we’re to learn to cultivate creativity in a systemic way, definitions are a good place to start. “Creativity is the process of having original ideas that have value,” explains Robinson. In *Out of Our Minds* he goes even further, breaking down creativity as several interwoven processes: the first is generative (‘It may begin with a thought that is literally half-formed’); and the second is evaluative (‘At the right time and in the right way, critical appraisal is essential. At the wrong point, it can kill an emerging idea’).

But on whose shoulders does it fall to get the balance right? Is creativity fostered from the top down? “There are some things we know about leadership which tend to inhibit creative thinking,” says Robinson. “Leaders can perpetuate problems when they try and control everything and remove the discretion of people in their organisation. What you want to do is free up the abilities of everybody to contribute ideas, because everybody has ideas, and you need to create a climate in which that will happen. The role of a creative leader is not ‘command and control’, it’s more like ‘climate control’. You create a culture.”

In an age where corporations can be supplanted by more nimble start-ups, how does one go from machine-like monolith to adaptive hub of innovation? “The big shift is about recognising that human communities – whether a company, a school, a family or a neighbourhood – at their best are organic, and organisms are highly dynamic and evolutionary,” says Robinson, who’s steered both government bodies and Fortune 500 companies into more creative seas. “It’s about getting people to shift from this broadly mechanical metaphor they have in their heads for organisations to one that’s much more naturalistic.”



When the time comes to negotiate that leap, it's also important not to go to extremes. 'Creativity does not always require freedom from constraints or a blank page,' writes Robinson, 'great work often comes from working within formal constraints.'

If the first stage of leading a culture of innovation is acknowledging that 'organisations are not mechanisms and people are not components', stage two is accepting that there's no quick fix. "There are all kinds of things that will get in the way of creativity, but there is no guaranteed formula for making it happen," says Robinson.

He continues: "Very often people are looking for silver bullets: 'How do we do it?' There are rules and conventions you can learn from the past, but the great thing with creativity is there is always a chance you can come up with something completely different that no one has ever thought of before, and there is no set formula to get to that. It's about recognising that this isn't just about efficiency. It's about a frame of mind. It's a state of possibility that people have to engage with."

Embracing this state of possibility is more critical now than ever. Changing how we think about innovation isn't a luxury, says Robinson, but an economic imperative: "The world that I grew up in is nothing at all like the world we live in now. The balance of trade is shifting around the world. Manufacturing is being distributed. More people than ever before are working with their heads and their minds. Technology has created entirely new dynamics, whole new industries, whole new forms of competition. And the rate of change means people have to innovate much more rapidly to keep pace. If you don't keep up, you're going to go bust. That's not a theory."

In both books, Robinson highlights population growth and technology as key triggers of social change: 'Many of the challenges we face are being generated by the powerful interaction of these forces.' Today, he references British sociologist [Raymond Williams](#), whose book, *The Long Revolution*, analyses cultural shifts through a holistic lens: "If you look at a culture, whether it's a community, a country, a company or a family, you can talk about different aspects of it. You can talk about legal systems, moral systems; you can talk about forms of behaviour; you can talk about family structure; you can isolate all the different bits of it, like you're dissecting a brain. But the way you experience a culture is not how these things are separate, but how they all affect each other, how they all wrap around each other and become part of a whole."

It's only when we start to appreciate the complex nature of cultural change that we begin to understand why creativity – the ability to react, adapt and recreate – is absolutely critical, especially as bigger challenges come hurtling into view. Because with every obstacle comes the opportunity for renewal: “On the one hand, technology has created the need for innovation,” says Robinson, “but it has also created the means for it. What all these things are contributing to is a shift of consciousness. With climate change, for example, people are sensing that we’re doing something stupid with the planet and we have to rethink our relationship to it. People are becoming more aware of the risks that we’re running as a species and are beginning to wake up and realise that a lot of the dangers we face are the result of short-sighted innovations – that we need to think more deeply and see more clearly.

“The real hope for the future comes from the ground up, not from the top down,” he concludes. “That’s why I spend so much of my time encouraging people to believe in their own creative powers. They need to take responsibility for their own lives. They need to get involved and think differently, and new technologies are a tremendous means of doing that. I am always optimistic when I think of how much human beings have achieved.”