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BusinessWeek, February 2006, an interview with Sir Ken Robinson

Creativity By Jessie Scanlon

Reading, Writing, and Creativity

Education guru Sir Ken Robinson talks about the importance of nurturing innovative solutions in the classroom -- indeed, in every aspect of modern life

Sir Ken Robinson, now a senior advisor to the J. Paul Getty Trust in Los Angeles, was knighted in 2003 for his commitment to creativity and education. for four years from 1985 the British citizen was director of The Arts in Schools Project, a major initiative to improve teaching of the arts in his native land, and in 1998 he was appointed by the government to chair the National Advisory Committee on Creative & Cultural Education, the largest-ever inquiry into the importance of creativity in education and the economy. Advertisement

Since then, nearly \$1 billion has been put into initiatives based on the so-called Robinson Report. In the meantime, Robinson has become a frequent speaker on creativity as a broader concept, arguing that the ability to think creatively is essential for students as they seek jobs, companies as they go up against competitors, and nations competing in the global economy.

Prior to his presentation at the TED conference in Monterey, Calif., this week, Robinson spoke with BusinessWeek Online editor Jessie Scanlon.

Creativity is the latest buzzword in the corporate world. What's your explanation?

The world is changing so quickly that promoting the ability for creative thinking and promoting cultural adaptability is essential. Remember that kids starting school this year will be retiring in 2065. We don't have a clue about what the world will be like then.

The trouble is that the educational system isn't designed to promote this sort of innovative thinking that we need. It is designed to promote uniformity and a certain type of narrow skill set. Creativity is as important as literacy and numeracy, and I actually think people understand that creativity is important - they just don't understand what it is.

How do you define creativity?

Ultimately it's the process of having original ideas, but there are several steps. The first step is

imagination, the capacity that we all have to see something in the mind's eye. Creativity is then using that imagination to solve problems -- call it applied imagination. Then innovation is putting that creativity into practice as applied creativity.

That seems pretty straightforward. What do people not understand?

There are several common misconceptions. The first is that people think that only some are creative. It's in the nature of human beings that we are creative. The second misconception is that creativity is about design and marketing. What the TED conference shows is that creativity is central to the practice of science and business and more. Creative initiatives should help you find what you are passionate about. The third is that you can't do anything about it. You can cultivate creativity.

How?

There are several elements, but I think the first is curriculum. Things like the recent Innovation Initiative in the U.S. are a big mistake, because they focus too much on math and science. Yes, the U.S. needs more people doing math and more doing science, but it needs creative people in all fields.

The Renaissance was a flowering on all fronts. It concerns me that this U.S. initiative is focused on a piece of the problem but not the whole thing. A second element is teaching. You can't just give someone a creativity injection. You have to create an environment for curiosity and a way to encourage people and get the best out of them.

Companies that are clued into the innovation imperative have set up labs intended to foster creativity. But it can't be as easy as setting up a cool room with creative toys and a whiteboard.

No. On the corporate level, Pixar is a good example. The company has something called Pixar University, that runs classes, events, workshops and stuff throughout the day. Every employee is entitled to spend four hours a week at Pixar University, and they are encouraged to not take anything job-related. That keeps peoples' minds alive.

You can't be a creative thinker if you're not stimulating your mind, just as you can't be an Olympic athlete if you don't train regularly. I think that will be the big challenge for John Lasseter as he moves to Disney.

At the same time, anything companies do in the short term is only half the battle. Companies can and should do better at cultivating creativity. But the educational system needs to do a better job of building the talent pool.

What's an example of a school district doing that well?

I'm working with a nonprofit in Arizona and Oklahoma called A+ Schools that is working to rewrite the curriculum with the input of the community, and trying to develop teaching methods to match individual learning styles. For instance my daughter is 16 and was practically failing chemistry. One day her teacher called and said she'd like to work with her one-on-one. The upshot is that she went from a borderline F to an A- in three weeks.

One-on-one teaching sounds great, but how does it scale?

First of all this is achievable. When the U.S. first introduced state education, people thought it was impossible. Now we take public, tax-financed education for granted. While some of the challenge that education faces has been caused by information technology, IT also must be part of the solution. Especially today when most kids are digital natives -- not like us digital immigrants.

Schools also need to be broken into smaller units and individual schools or principals need more autonomy, along with certain incentives. School reforms always emphasize standards and standardized testing, as if it's akin to a McDonald's (MCD) franchise. But standardized testing demoralizes teachers, demoralizes students, and incents people to teach to the test. Standardized testing is based on the idea that we have to make education teacher-proof and I think we have to do the reverse.

What does that mean for business?

A lot of the secret of the creative corporation is looking hard at employees and realizing their strengths. When companies first start thinking about becoming creative, they tend to start thinking about hiring people from outside. They don't think about the people they already have. And a lot of creativity is in helping people, whether students or employees, to find their talent -- the way they are creative. Because most everyone is.

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