‘Why creativity now? A conversation
with Sir Ken Robinson’ transcript

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AMY AZZAM: Hi, I’m Amy Azzam, senior associate editor of educational leadership. Recently I had the opportunity to speak with creativity expert, Sir Ken Robinson, here’s what he has to say about why creativity is so important now …

What’s the biggest misconception we have about creativity?

SIR KEN ROBINSON: I think there are several, one is that it’s about special people – that only a few people are really creative. And I think the assumption has to be, and mine certainly is, that everybody has tremendous creative capacities. So in other words, a policy for creativity in education is about everybody, not just a few.

The second misconception is that it’s about special activities. Often people associate creativity with the arts only. Well I’m a great advocate of the arts, but creativity is really about everything, it’s possible in science, in technology, in maths, in physical education, it’s a function of everything we do. So creative education is about the whole curriculum, not just part of it.

And the third misconception is that creativity is just about letting yourself go, you know, and kind of running around the room and going a bit crazy. And really, creativity is in many ways, a very disciplined process that requires skill and knowledge, and control. Obviously, it also enquires imagination and inspiration and those things too. But it’s not simply a question of giving vent, it’s not just an outlet, it’s, I think: a disciplined part of daily education.

AMY AZZAM: Both creativity and critical thinking have been flagged as essential 21st Century skills, yet some people think of them as being as separate as oil and water, what’s your take?

SIR KEN ROBINSON: I think it’s interesting that people see them as being sometimes see them as being opposed and I think it’s partly of the misconceptions I’ve just been talking about. You know, that people associate creativity with being totally free and unstructured. I think what we really need to get a hold of, is the idea that you can’t be creative if you don’t do something. You know, that creativity is a practical process of doing things. And you can be creative with anything, you can be creative in maths, you can be creative in science, you can be creative in music and dance and cuisine, in teaching, in running a family, engineering.

The reason is that creativity is a process of having new ideas, I define it more fully, really, and it’s a process of having original ideas that have value. So a big part of being creative is looking for new ideas, new ways of doing things, within whatever activity you’re involved in. If you’re a creative chef, then your originality is going to be judged in terms of cuisine. There’s no point of planning the criteria of modern jazz to somebody who is trying to create a new soufflé.

Creativity isn’t just about coming up with new ideas, some ideas might be completely crazy, impractical and not feasible and don’t lead anywhere. An essential bit of every creative process (I think) is evaluation, you know, even as you’re doing you own work. If somebody is composing a piece on the piano, part of it is, you’re listening to what you’re doing, is that right, does that work, is that going in a good direction. And it’s the same if you’re working on a mathematical problem, you’re constantly evaluating it, thinking does that feel right?

AMY AZZAM: So you’re saying that creativity is about problem solving then? That it’s not necessarily just some brilliant insight that just comes to you in an instant?

SIR KEN ROBINSON: That’s right. You know, a creative process may begin with a flash of a new idea or it may begin with a hunch about something, it may not you know, it may start as just noodling around at the problem and then you get some fresh ideas along the way. But that’s my point really it’s a process, it’s not just a single event. And the process involves a lot of critical thinking, a lot of critical judgement within the domain that you’re operating in. I don’t see these two things opposed at all, I think genuine creative process involve a lot of critical thinking as well as trying to bring imaginative insights and fresh ideas. But you always have to judge whether this is worth it, you know, whether this adds up to anything.

AMY AZZAM: Why is creativity especially important right now?

SIR KEN ROBINSON: I think there are several reasons, one of them is that the challenges that we face currently, are (I believe and many other people believe it too) without precedent. You know, there are more people living on this planet now than at any time in history. I mean exponentially more, the world’s population doubled in the past 30 years. We’re facing increasing strain on the world’s natural resources. Technology is advancing at a headlong rate of speed. It’s transforming how people work, how they think, how they connect with each other. It’s transforming our sense of cultural values.

If you add these two things together and the strains they are placing on our political institutions, our financial institutions, on healthcare, on education, there really isn’t a time in history where you could look back and say, ‘Well, of course, this is the same thing all over again.’ It isn’t. This is really new, and we’re going to need every ounce of ingenuity, I think and imagination, and creativity to confront some of these problems as a species.

But also if you think of it in terms of our individual lives, we’re living in times of massive unpredictability. I’m always keen to say this, the kids who are starting school this coming fall will be retiring – if they ever do – round about 2070. Well nobody has a clue what the world’s going to look like in five years’ time, or next year actually, and yet it’s the job of education to help us you know, to enable kids to make sense of the world they’re going to live in and to make their way in it.

So I think taken overall there was never a greater need for humanity to think differently, to be inventive, imaginative and innovative in dealing with the problems that we all face. These skills you know, are essential to us, they’re essential for our economy. I work a lot with corporations these days, Fortune 500 companies and they’re always saying ‘We need people who can be innovative, who can think differently’. If you look at the mortality rate among companies it’s massive you know America now is facing the biggest challenge it’s ever faced to maintain its position in the world economy. While all these things demand you know, high levels of innovation, creativity and ingenuity. And at the moment I think we’re systematically educating it out of our kids, not promoting it.

AMY AZZAM: People tend to think of creativity as an individual trait, but is there a social dimension to creativity that’s relevant to the 21st Century?

SIR KEN ROBINSON: Absolutely, yes, I mean I really think that obviously its individuals who think things in their own minds and consciousness but, the truth is that most original thinking comes through collaboration and through the stimulation of other people’s ideas. I mean nobody in the end lives in a vacuum, even people who live on their own, solitary poets or sole inventers in their garage, they’re still drawing from the ideas of other people, they’re drawing from the influence, the cultures they’re part of, from the influence of other people’s minds and achievements.

So I always think there’s a cultural dimension to any form of creative process you know, if you look at the great companies, if you look at the great cultural groups, the great scientific breakthroughs they’ve almost always come through some form of fierce collaboration between people with a common set of interests but very different ways of thinking. And I think this is one of the great skills we have to promote and teach people; the skills of collaboration and of benefiting from diversity, rather than promoting homogeneity. And that’s the great problem I think of the moment, that education is being so dominated by this cultured standardized testing and with the particular view of intelligence, and a particularly narrow source of curriculum and education system.

Some of the basic skills and processes that creative achievement depend upon are being flattened and stifled. So there’s no doubt in my mind that collaboration and diversity and the exchange of ideas and building on other people’s achievements is at the heart of the creative process. And education which focuses only on the individual in isolation is bound to frustrate some of those possibilities.

I was looking recently at the work of Thomas Edison, there’s a couple of great books out about Edison at the moment. Edison was one the most prolific inventors in American history, he had over 1,100 patents in the U.S. Patent Office. He’s the person we think about- how great was Edison. But actually, Edison’s great talent was mobilizing other people. He had teams and teams of people working with him, he had cross-disciplinary groups, and they worked collaboratively. He set them tight targets, they gave themselves clear objectives and tight deadlines to meet them and pulled out every stop to work collaboratively.

AMY AZZAM: Can you teach creativity?

SIR KEN ROBINSON: Yes. I tell you why ‘I say that, the reason people think you can’t teach it because they don’t understand it themselves. I think very often they say, ‘Well, I’m not very creative, so I can’t do it.’

Well the thing is, there are two ways of thinking about teaching creativity, one is that there are, so to speak generic skills of creative thinking, which can be taught in the way we can teach people to read, write, and teach them to do math. There are some basic processes, basic skills which are to do with freeing up the way people approach problems. There are skills of divergent thinking, for example, which encourage thinking through analogies and thinking through metaphors, and thinking visually.

I’ve done a lot of work with groups like this, I remember working with one group a while ago, a group of about 30 people who were actually the executive group of a community, in the Native American community promoting innovation across their tribe. We sat around a boardroom table for the first hour, and I guess they were expecting me to get some flip charts out and show them some techniques. We actually did a bit of that, but what I actually got them to do was to get into groups and to start to draw pictures of some of the challenges they’re facing as a community.

Well, the minute you get people to think visually – to draw pictures or to move rather than sit and write bullet points – something different happens in the room. You know? And so breaking them up so they aren’t sitting at the same desk and getting them to work with people they wouldn’t normally sit with, creates a different type of dynamic in the space. So there are very particular skills you can teach people, of freeing up their own thinking, of valuing diversity of opinion in a room.

But there’s also so to speak personal creativity, by which I mean, people often achieve their own best work at a personal level when they connect with a particular medium or set of materials or processes that excites them.

That’s what my new book is about, *The Element*, is about finding your passion changes everything. That’s really about personal creativity and what I mean by that is, for some people they come alive when they’re doing mathematics. One of the people I have in the book is this guy called Terence Tao who won the Fields Medal for mathematics which is the equivalent of a Nobel Prize. Well he was doing simple equations when he was 3, he took a college entrance exam in mathematics when he was 8 and got 97%, he had a PhD in pure mathematics by the time he was 20 and by the time he was 30 he won the MacArthur Genius award.

Maths, you know I think it’s reasonable to say that Terence gets the hang of maths really, frankly in a way that I don’t and in a way that you may not but then I talked to other people who were gymnasts. Some amazing woman was a pool player to musicians, to scientists. In all cases what happened was that they found this particular thing and became absolutely enlivened but it, whether it was music, or Jazz or the triple jump, something that they resonated with. They found they had a personal amplitude for it. And if you combine a personal amplitude with a passion for the same thing then you go in to a different place, I think creatively. I was saying jokingly the other day, I’m about the same (well he’s a bit older than me actually but) I realized a few years ago that Eric Clapton was given his first guitar about the same time I was given a guitar; well it worked out for Eric you know, in a way it didn’t quite for me. He got the hang on it but combined it with a tremendous passion for it.

So part of it in scores is understanding that creativity is a process, it’s not just an event, it’s not just about random inspiration. That part of it too though is about understanding that creativity is discovering your personal talents. So a big piece of my argument is about personalizing the curriculum.

We have a major problem, not just in America but in many of the old industrialized countries with our education systems. If you have a system as we do in the States where there’s a 30% drop-out rate, where in some of our communities, in the African-American/Latino communities it’s over 50%, in some of the Native-American communities it’s nearly 80% drop-out rate. You know, you can’t at this point just blame the kids for it you know, with that amount of wastage there’s something wrong with the system. And I think what’s wrong with it is it’s about impersonal forms of education, it’s about sitting in rows and not discovering things that impassions them or which invigorates them or which turns them on.

And that’s increasingly the case with this cultured standardized testing, it’s totally counterproductive and if we know anything about education, our own education you know, we came alive in certain sorts of lessons with certain teachers when we are given an opportunity to do things that invigorates us. And when you find things you’re good at, you tend to get better at everything you know, because your confidence is up and your attitude is different. And what our system has been doing, too often now, is systematically alienating people from their own talents and therefore from the whole process of education. So this isn’t to me a whimsy argument, like wouldn’t it be nice if we all did something we liked, it’s a fundamental human truth that people perform better when they’re in touch with things that inspire them. And for some people that’s gymnastic, and for some people it’s playing the Blues and for some people it’s doing calculous.

And we know this because human culture is so diverse and rich and our education system is becoming increasingly dreary and monotonous. And there’s no mistake, no surprise to me that some of the kids are pulling out of it even the ones that stay there are often detached. I don’t mean nobody benefits from this process, of course some people do, but it’s far too few to justify the waste.

AMY AZZAM: If creativity is so important, should we assess it? And if so, how should we assess it?

SIR KEN ROBINSON: You can’t assess people – in general – for being creative because you have to be doing something to be creative. But the good news is of course you can therefore asses people according to what it is they’re doing you know, if you’re working in math classes and the teaching is encouraging you to look for new approaches, to try new ways of thinking, to try new ideas out then of course you can begin to judge the level of creativity and imaginativeness within the framework of mathematics as you would within the framework of music or dance or literature.

I make a distinction between teaching creatively by which I mean teachers using their own creative skills to make ideas and content more interesting and some of the great teachers we know are the most creative teachers very often, because they find a way of connecting what they’re teaching to your interests.

But you can also talk about teaching for creativity, where the pedagogy is specifically designed to encourage other people to think creatively. And I’ve seen a lot of that in great Math lessons, I’ve seen it in great Language lessons, I’ve seen it in great Music and Art lessons; where you’re encouraging kids to experiment, to innovate themselves. Not giving them all the answers but giving them the tools they need to find out what the answers might be or to explore new avenues.

And yes I think therefore within particular domains it’s perfectly appropriate to say ‘we’re interested in what new ways you can approach these issues? And to give people some sense, whether it’s an individual mark I mean that’s a larger question I think. But certainly giving people credit, and for originality and giving them encouragement for it and giving them some way of reflecting on whether these new ideas are effective or powerful or not as good as the existing ones, I think it’s a powerful part of pedagogy.