Sir Ken Robinson calls for a revolution in education

Teach your children well

By Will Fifield
SAD PERFORMANCE statistics and the alarming number of high school dropouts and unemployed young people make it easy to feel despondent about the current state of affairs in education. Sir Ken Robinson, an internationally recognized leader in the development of education, creativity and innovation, brings much-needed inspiration to the subject. With wry humor and a sharp wit, he passionately argues not for reform, but for what he calls a revolution in education.

Robinson, who grew up in Liverpool and is professor emeritus of education at the University of Warwick in the UK, believes we need to rethink education from the ground up. To this end, he works with governments in Europe, Asia and the U.S., and with international agencies, Fortune 500 companies and cultural organizations.

In 1998, Robinson led a national commission on creativity, education and the economy for the UK government. His report, All Our Futures: Creativity, Culture and Education, was published to wide acclaim in 1999. He was a key figure in developing a strategy for creative and economic development as part of the peace process in Northern Ireland, and has also advised the Singapore government. In 2003 he received a knighthood from the Queen.

In 2006, he gave a speech, Do Schools Kill Creativity? at a conference. The speech was posted on the Internet and has subsequently been seen by an estimated 300 million people. It's peppered with standout quotes, such as “If you're not prepared to be wrong, you'll never come up with anything original,” and “We run companies where we stigmatize mistakes.” His books The Element: How Finding Your Passion Changes Everything (Penguin/Viking, 2009) and Out of Our Minds: Learning to Be Creative (Capstone/Wiley, 2011) are popular. The Element is a New York Times best-seller and has been translated into 23 languages. He's just written a new book, tentatively titled Finding Your Element, due out next year.

The Costco Connection recently spoke with Robinson via telephone at his house in Los Angeles to discuss creativity, intelligence and education.

The Costco Connection: In your lectures and books, you point out that, very often, young children believe they're creative, but most adults don't. What happens?

Ken Robinson: Several things happen. One is that as children get older, they become more socially aware and consequently more self-conscious. It's why very young children are happy to believe that there's a Father Christmas, and 12-year-olds aren't. They get hit by issues of plausibility at that point. Really? He takes presents to every house in the world? In one night? Are you serious? As we age, people also tend to become more self-critical. We begin doubting ourselves and our capabilities. So part of what happens is the ordinary process of maturation and getting older.

But a big institutional reason that adults often believe they're not creative is education. Being creative has all kinds of manifestations. It's not just in the arts. It's not just in music or dance or theater or writing or painting, though it is in all of those things. You can be creative at anything. You can be creative in business. You can be creative in technology and science—in anything that involves your intelligence. But being creative, which is about having original ideas, requires actual skills in the fields in which you're working—and an openness of mind, a willingness to explore, a confidence in your imagination, a willingness to try things out and make mistakes and try again.

What happens in education, too often and increasingly, I'm sorry to say, is that a dampening culture of standardization gets brought in. The curriculum tends to become very narrow. There are all kinds of opportunities that we could make available to kids that we don't. So, if you happen to be a young Matt Groening [creator of The Simpsons] or Mick Fleetwood [drummer of the rock group Fleetwood Mac], and you happen to be interested in art or music, and the curriculum excludes these subjects, you may never discover that these are things that you could be good at.

Conformity and standardization and sitting still and doing multiple-choice questions and being tested at the end—these features of education are inimical to the kind of original thinking and confident imaginations that underpin real innovation. I think as we get older our expectations shift and education tends to suppress some of the basic aptitudes and attitudes that underpin real creative work. The result is that adults end up thinking they're not very creative.

CC: So, if the current education system hampers creativity, which you've just explained is key to innovation in any field, then what needs to change?

KR: The current systems of education were developed in the 19th century to meet the needs of the Industrial Revolution, and it shows itself in two ways. One is in the organizational culture of education, which for the most part is very regimented. It's organized a bit like an assembly line. Children are divided into age groups, for example, as if the most important thing they have in common is their date of manufacture. Why? We don't do that in families or in the general community. It's done in schools for reasons of organizational efficiency, not for effective education.

We divide each day up into 40-minute periods, for the same reason. And then the day is divided into separate subjects. We have standardized testing at the end of it. It's very much like an industrial process, and it's not an accident, because our systems of mass education were developed in the 19th century to meet the needs of the new industrial economies and they were designed for efficiency, like other systems of mass production.

Second, our education systems are overlaid with a particular intellectual culture, which is promoted by the needs of the universities. This culture gives a premium to certain types of
academic work and tends to demean practical and vocational work as second-class options. But the fact is that aptitude takes many different forms, and we have a view of it in education that is far too narrow and wasteful. In all of these ways, the dominant culture of education is oriented toward the last century, not the present one.

The challenges our children face now are quite different from the ones that people faced in the 19th century. The world is being transformed by digital technology. We have surging population growth. There are more and more demands on natural resources. The world’s becoming more interconnected, more complicated. The life cycles of jobs and occupations are getting shorter as innovation increases. If we’re being honest and serious about how we educate our kids, we need to look at the real lives that they’re leading now—the lives they’d like to lead. That calls for a different sort of education to the one that most of us came through. Employers everywhere say, for example, that they need people who are creative, who can work in teams, who can collaborate and innovate. Our current systems of education do almost exactly the opposite.

**CC:** How well has the education system served those who are now in the workforce?

**KR:** When I was working on *The Element*, many of the people I spoke with didn’t feel that they fitted in with the kind of education they were having. That was true of Matt Groening. He spent most of his time doodling and drawing and doing cartoons all over his books. He didn’t have a career plan in mind; it was just something he did compulsively. Mick Fleetwood said that he was always tapping and beating out rhythms on cushions, and again, he said it wasn’t a very clear signal that there was anything tremendously important going on; it was just something he compulsively did.

A lot of people I know went through education feeling unconnected to it. And that’s really what *The Element* tries to illustrate. But this isn’t just about the arts. My arguments apply to science, technology and all other areas of education too. The point is that there should not be a single measure of ability or interest. Human beings have a huge range of talents and interests, and we need to take that into account in education.

**CC:** What about people who have a huge passion for something but little or no aptitude for it?

**KR:** It’s hard to overestimate the importance of passion. There are people in all kinds of fields who would consider themselves—rightly or wrongly—to be only modestly talented in a particular area, but they’ve gone on to do well in it, or thoroughly enjoy it, because they have such a strong passion for it. Equally, I know people who might be highly gifted in a particular activity who have no real interest in it. I think passion is the great driving force here, and passion is the right word for it because it is about loving something. If you’re attracted to something, then you get energized by doing it.

**CC:** Do you see examples of schools that are doing a good job of teaching children the skills they’ll need to succeed in today’s world?

**KR:** I do, and in my book *Out of Our Minds: Learning to Be Creative*, I describe in detail the kinds of changes I believe we have to make and give examples of how they work.

The fact is that there are great schools everywhere, but there is no single model or type of school that should be adopted everywhere. This is one of the ways in which we have to think differently about education. Schools need to be customized to the needs of the students who go to them and to the nature of the communities that they are serving.
Although there’s no single model, there are some common principles and approaches that I believe all schools should adopt.

To begin with, education has to be personalized to every student. If anyone reading this has two or more children, I’ll bet you that they are completely different from each other. If you’re a parent, you’re never confused by which of your children you’re talking to. The reason is that we’re all unique. We all have our own talents, passions, motivations and interests.

Education has to address us all as individuals. Sometimes I hear people say that we can’t afford to create personalized education for everyone. The fact is that we can’t afford not to. In the United States, something like 30 percent of students don’t finish high school. It’s a much higher figure in some parts of the country. That’s a massive waste of talent and ability and a huge drain on the national economy.

Many kids drop out because they don’t see the point in school and don’t feel it’s about them at all. The best way to improve education is to reengage them personally.

**CC:** How do you go about addressing students as individuals in education?

**KR:** What does it mean to personalize education? It means, first, that schools have to have a broad curriculum that allows all students to discover their real strengths and the areas in which they flourish.

Second, teaching has to take account of how different children actually learn. Not all kids learn best sitting still for hours absorbing verbal information. Some children respond best to visual information; some need to move and express themselves physically.

Third, the schedule of the school needs to be more flexible to allow learning across age groups and between disciplines.

And fourth, assessment has to be more descriptive of what students have done and rely less on single numbers and grades, which give very little information and tend to turn the whole process of education into a kind of standardized obstacle course.

The good news is that we can do all of these things now and some of the most successful schools in the country are doing them.

**CC:** How are the successful schools you see doing these things?

**KR:** New digital technologies make it perfectly possible to personalize the curriculum and the schedule, and the tools and applications that are now available make it easier than ever to change the nature of teaching and learning. I don’t mean that technology is the answer to everything. I argue in all my talks and books that it is not. But it is a game changer for why we’re educating our children and for how we can do it.

The big change, I believe, has to be from seeing education as a mechanical or industrial process to seeing it much more as a human and organic one. Gardeners know that they can’t make plants grow. Plants grow themselves. Gardeners provide the right conditions for that to happen. Good gardeners understand those conditions. Running a school or teaching a class or raising a family is much more like gardening than [like] engineering. It’s about providing the best conditions for growth and development. And if we get that right we’ll see an abundant harvest of talent, commitment, imagination and creativity in all of our children and in all of our schools.

There have always been schools that have been practicing the sorts of principles I’ve been talking about. There aren’t enough of them yet, but encouraging schools to personalize and customize education to real children is where the revolution [in education] will come from. I’m not waiting for some shaft of enlightenment to emerge from our government buildings. Real change almost always happens from the ground up. Part of my mission is to encourage more and more people to make changes in the work they do. If enough people do it, that’s a movement. As Gandhi once said, we should all aim to be the change we want to see in the world.