

# What Sir Ken Got Wrong

Posted on [October 12, 2013](#) by [Joe Kirby](#)

*“We are educating people out of their creativity”*

*Sir Ken Robinson*



**Sir Ken Robinson’s ideas on education are not only impractical; they are undesirable.**

If you’re interested in education, at some point someone will have sent you a link to a video by Sir Ken Robinson, knighted for services to education in England in 2003. He has over 250,000 followers on Twitter, his videos have had over 40,000,000 views online, and his 2006 lecture is the most viewed TED talk of all time. The RSA Opening Minds curriculum his ideas are associated with is taught in over 200 schools in the UK. He clearly has some influence.

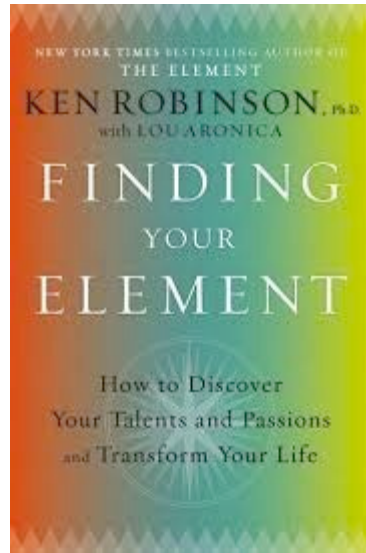
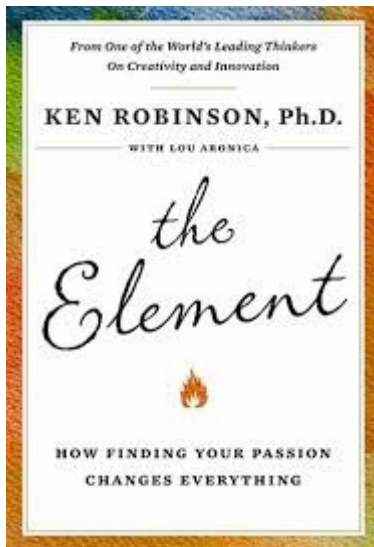
What explains such iconic influence? Like a magician’s performance, explaining the magic helps to dispel it. Humour, anecdote and charm combined with online, animated media explain why it’s gone viral. Jokes get contagious laughter from his audience in the video, and as online viewers, we laugh along too. Anecdotes about a little girl having the pluck of drawing a picture of God to show everyone what he looks like, or about Shakespeare as an annoying little boy, are part of this charm offensive. And the RSA graphic illustration being drawn before our eyes is just a very cool way of animating ideas.



Sir Ken's ideas are incredibly seductive, but they are wrong, spectacularly and gloriously wrong. Let me explain why. But first, beyond the jokes and anecdotes, let's get to the nub of what the ideas actually are.

In a few sentences, this is his argument about education:

1. Schools kill children's **innate creative talents** because...
2. The school system prioritises **academic ability**.
3. The system neglects **other intelligences**.
4. **Creativity** is as important as **literacy**.
5. Subject **hierarchies** of English, maths & science over drama, dance & art are damaging.
6. We are in thrall to **conformity** rather than **diversity** of intelligences.
7. So we must transform how the system nurtures talent and intelligences.



## **All that glistens is not gold**

Here are some select quotations from his talks and books that illustrate his ideas:

### **1. On Innate Talent**

*‘All kids have talents, and we squander them ruthlessly.’*

*‘We don’t grow into creativity, we grow out of it.’*

*‘Education dislocates people from their **natural talents, buried deep**; you have to create circumstances where they show themselves.’*

### **2. On Academic Ability**

*‘What is education for? Who succeeds? Who are the winners? The purpose is to produce university academics. The whole system is predicated on **academic ability**, a protracted process of University entrance. Our system has mined our minds for this commodity...’*

### **3. On Multiple Intelligences**

*‘Academic ability is seen as intelligence; others are not valued, or stigmatised.’*

*‘Education should be personalised to every learning style.’*

#### **4. On Creativity**

*‘Schools kill creativity.’*

*‘**Creativity** is as important as **literacy**, and we should treat it with the same status.’*

*‘Creativity as I mean it is just a metaphor for multiple talents and intelligences.’*

*‘The education system discourages creativity.’*

*‘What we know about children is this: children don’t need to be helped to learn, for the most part. They are born with vast, voracious appetite for learning ... evolve in the womb with appetite... You don’t teach your child to speak, though we do teach them to write. Writing appeared much later in human evolution. But they have a vast appetite for learning and it starts to dissipate when we start to educate them and force-feed them information.’*

#### **5. On Subject Hierarchies**

*‘Every education system on earth has the same **hierarchy** of subjects – why maths and languages and not drama and dance?’*

*‘The academic curriculum is based on a series of assumptions that are irrelevant to our current circumstances’.*

*‘I believe the way we have to go is not to go back to a subject-based curriculum.’*

*‘I think we should question that there are subjects... It’s not like we don’t know; we know what works in schools; and we know that there is a better alternative to narrowly conceived subject-based curricula that enshrine a hierarchy.’*

*‘The reason I don’t like the idea of subjects is that it suggests you can differentiate the curriculum purely on the basis of information or propositional knowledge. History is not just a bag of content, it is a discipline, a process of reflection. I just think it’s based on a false premise that you can lift information out of the world and pin it to the wall like a butterfly, and that is what the old academic curriculum was too much about, what we’re trying to get away from.’*

## **6. On Conformity**

*‘The big issue is **conformity** – a fast-food model where everything is **standardised**, not customised.’*

*‘Industrial systems are impersonal and emphasise conformity in the curriculum and teaching methods and standardisation in assessment.’*

## **7. On Transformation**

*‘We must rethink the fundamental principles of education.’*

*‘Reform is no use any more – that’s just improving a broken model. What we need is not evolution but a **revolution**, for it to be transformed into something else – one of the challenges is fundamental **innovation**.’*

*‘It’s a change from an industrial, manufacturing model of batching people – based on agriculture, not mechanic but organic – to create conditions under which they can flourish. It’s not about scaling a new solution – but where we allow people to create their own solution, a personalised curriculum. We must revolutionise education. We have to change from **industrial** to an **agricultural** model, to where schools can flourish tomorrow.’*

*‘It’s already happening – in Austin, Texas, a whole district has given every kid an iPad. It’s a revolution in the way they’re teaching and learning. And you can multiply the example. The system is already adapting.’*



## *iPads for all?*

### **Seductive but Wrong**

These ideas are very, very seductive. It's easy to be enthused by the grand conceptions of 'talent', 'multiple intelligences', 'revolution', 'innovation', 'paradigm shift' and 'transformation'. It's easy to recoil from the horror of 'conformity', 'standardisation,' 'academic ability' and 'hierarchy'.

Head of English Alex Quigley has written convincingly here on how seductive these ideas are, and [why we should mistrust Ken Robinson](#): initially 'entranced ... enraptured ... infatuated', he soon felt 'beguiled', 'frustrated' at the 'cult of personality', then 'healthily wary'. Some, though, were not so seduced. UK education blogger, teacher, author and expert on education research Tom Bennett has [challenged](#) Sir Ken's ideas:

*'There are many dangerous ideas he promotes that, while well-meant in root, bear dangerous fruits.'*

*'The suggestion that the contemporary curriculum is somehow the death-knell of creativity is nonsense.'*

*'The idea that schools somehow drive creativity out of a child is laughable.'*

*'I tire of someone who has never been a classroom teacher telling me what classroom teaching is like, or how children should be taught. Being told by a non-teacher with a PhD in education how to teach is a bit like being told by a virgin how to get laid.'*

*'His theories of what creativity is, and how it must be taught, are sophistry and illusion. There isn't a shin-bone of evidence to support what he says.'*

*'... easy to find inspirational, but empty. It's far harder to inspire someone with concrete and practical ideas. Superficially convincing but ultimately brainless.'*



### ***Ultimately brainless?***

Cognitive scientist Dan Willingham has also [\*\*challenged\*\*](#) Sir Ken's approach:

*'Robinson suggests that what's needed in education is a "paradigm shift". Maybe so, but Robinson makes a poor case...'*

*'I lose confidence in Robinson because the framework in which he puts education and education reform is not in the least revolutionary. In fact he's tapping a very rich, very old vein of thought... I want Robinson to tell me what's going to make things different this time around.'*

*'My other problem with this video is that some of the details are inaccurate. Getting details wrong makes me less confident that Robinson is getting the big things right, and failing to acknowledge previous attempts to change the paradigm makes me uncertain of his vision.'*

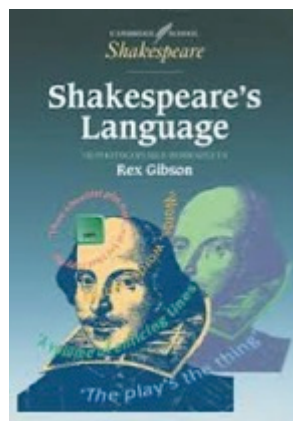
Quigley, Bennett and Willingham are right: the evidence isn't often on Sir Ken's side. For example, in his 2006 talk (with 25million+ views) he mentions that the reason why women multi-task better than men is probably because the 'corpus callosum' in the brain is thicker in women. It turns out this is from one study in 1992. The evidence from a meta-analysis of 49 studies from 1980 to 1997 shows that 'no sex difference could be found in the size of the corpus callosum, whether or not account was taken of larger male brain size.' This is just one example of the faulty evidence for his claims.



## **Practice is the path to mastery**

Others are using Hans Zimmer and William Shakespeare as examples in his anecdotes. The reason for their creativity is not innate talent. Zimmer was the son of two musicians, who grew up in a music studio and played by himself for countless hours. As Shakespeare expert Rex Gibson says:

*'Shakespeare is an outstanding example of how schooling can foster talent. Schoolboys learned by heart over 100 figures of rhetoric. His schooling provided an excellent resource for the future playwright. Everything Shakespeare learned at school he used in some way in his plays. Having mastered the rules of language, he was able to break and transform them. On this evidence, Shakespeare's education has been seen as an argument for the value of memorising and of constant practice.'*



## **Schooling can foster talent**

Unwittingly, Sir Ken has stumbled on the very example that belies his idea that traditional schooling kills creativity. And this is true not just in the musical or artistic sphere, but the political sphere too. Nelson Mandela in South Africa and the Black



Panthers in America turned their traditional education to radically revolutionary aims.

### **How is he wrong?**

Sir Ken's ideas aren't just impractical; they are undesirable. Here's the trouble with his arguments:

1. Talent, creativity and intelligence are not **innate**, but come through **practice**.
2. Learning styles and **multiple intelligences** don't exist.
3. **Literacy** and **numeracy** are the basis for **creativity**.
4. **Misbehaviour** is a bigger problem in our schools than **conformity**.
5. **Academic achievement** is vital but unequal, partly because...
6. Rich kids get rich cultural knowledge, poor kids don't.



### **False prophet?**

#### **1. Talent is not innate**

A growing body of research shows that talent isn't innate, waiting passively like a tooth ready to be extracted. Research collated in books from Malcolm [Gladwell](#), Carol [Dweck](#), Matthew [Syed](#), Daniel [Coyle](#), Geoff [Colvin](#), Daniel [Willingham](#), Doug [Lemov](#) and Paul [Tough](#) show that natural talent is a myth; it's only dedicated, determined and disciplined practice that leads to great achievement.

## **2. Multiple intelligences don't exist**

Dan Willingham has summarised the research and shown that [learning styles do not exist](#); on multiple intelligences, 'for scientists, [this theory of the mind is almost certainly incorrect](#)': *'The fact that the theory is an inaccurate description of the mind makes it likely that the more closely an application draws on the theory, the less likely the application is to be effective. All in all, educators would likely do well to turn their time and attention elsewhere.'*

## **3. Literacy and numeracy are the basis of creativity**

In the UK, 17% of school leavers leave school functionally illiterate, and 22% leave school functionally innumerate. Ask any parent what they would prefer: that their child left school unable to read, write or add up but able to dance and draw creatively, or unable to dance or draw creatively but able to read, write or add up. The reason why there's a hierarchy of subjects is because some are more empowering than others. If you can't read, you can't learn much else. If you can't do arithmetic, you can't become a teacher, doctor, engineer, scientist, plumber or electrician. Numeracy and literacy are complex evolutionary applications of civilisation; they take a great deal of time, practice and expert guidance to master, so we dedicate a lot of time to them in school, and rightly so. Sir Ken is wrong when he says children do not need to be helped to learn, for the most part: children do need to be helped to learn – every teacher knows that. We don't dedicate so much time to dancing and drawing because they don't disempower you so much if you can't do them.

## **4. Misbehaviour is more damaging than conformity**

In any classroom, without compliance with instructions, no one learns anything. Disruptive behaviour is chronic, [particularly in the most challenging schools](#). The problem for many teachers is not so much conformity, but rather pervasive disruption to teaching. Self-discipline is not an evil weed to be uprooted, but the foundation for effective learning. But then again, Sir Ken has not been teacher in a tough school – nor any primary or secondary school at all.

## **5. Academic achievement is important, but unequal**

Strong academic achievement in private schools allow 96% to go to University, and in the UK commandeer 70% of the jobs as high court judges, 54% of the jobs as doctors and 51% of the jobs as journalists, despite only educating 7% of children. Yet only 16% of the poorest pupils go to University, due to persistent academic underachievement. It's no good Sir Ken disparaging the education system's focus on academic ability; closing the gap in academic attainment is vital for social mobility, social equity and social justice in this country.

## **6. Subject knowledge is vital for critical and creative skills**

Decades of scientific research shows the importance of broad and domain-specific knowledge for reading, critical thinking and problem-solving skills. So it's no good Sir Ken disparaging subject-based curricula. All over the world, mastering subject disciplines is the route to success. It's no coincidence, no middle-class industrial Victorian conspiracy that China, South Korea, Canada and Scandinavia all organise their systems like this, as global expert Tim Oates explains: *'In all high-performing systems, the fundamentals of subjects are strongly emphasised, have substantial time allocation, and are the focus of considerable attention'*. It's the most effective way of organising teaching and learning, because, as [Daisy Christodoulou explains](#): *'thinking skills are subject-specific; our working memories are limited and easily overloaded by distractions; and pupils are novices,'* not experts, and so require expert guidance.



In short, Sir Ken is wrong on education: profoundly, spectacularly wrong.

So next time someone sends you a link to one of his videos, perhaps you could send the link to this blogpost back to them – what Sir Ken got wrong.

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