

BOOK REVIEWS

Creative Schools: The Grassroots Revolution That's Transforming Education, By: Ken Robinson and Lou Aronica

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Review by Alison LaGarry, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

In "Creative Schools: The Grassroots Revolution That's Transforming Education," Sir Ken Robinson lays out a framework and set of considerations for doing just that: transforming education. Those familiar with Robinson's work will recognize his signature style of humour. However, the tone of this book is quite serious. In the book, he provides a thorough analysis of the current state of education in America. He does this by proposing a shift from an industrial metaphor for schooling, to one of organic farming. In this new metaphor, education can be viewed as a dynamic ecological process where the focus becomes interdependency rather than out-put. In order to spin out this new metaphor, Robinson identifies various dimensions that affect or are affected within education including physical school space, overall purposes of schooling, teaching, curriculum, testing, leadership, community and family connections, and school culture.

Near the beginning of the book, Robinson states that change begins with three things: a critique, a vision, and a theory of change. The primary critique that drives this book is the same point made in his outrageously popular TED Talk; schools kill creativity. From this point, he uses the remainder of the book to elaborate a vision for creative schools. This vision begins with shifting our thinking about education away from an industrial metaphor of schooling. In this industrial metaphor, schooling is linear, and driven by an intense focus on output. In other words, preparing a set of workers to enter industry with a prescribed set of common skills. This model emphasizes conformity, and positions those who don't meet a single standard as "less able" or "disabled" (p. 36). Robinson suggests that shifting our vision of schooling requires an entirely different metaphor; he suggests organic farming. In this new metaphor, the purposes of schooling would centre on health, ecology, fairness and care. Additionally, this creates a foundation for schooling that emphasizes flexibility, dynamism, and interdependence.

In subsequent chapters, Robinson explains how his vision might be realized in each of the various dimensions of education listed above. He supports these arguments with several examples of schools where stakeholders are already working to transform education with great

success. It isn't until the very end of the book that Robinson begins to parse out some practical organizational suggestions for change. In all, I felt that he laid out a significant vision, but I wanted to know more about his theory of change. How might teachers or community stakeholders, with limited resources, transform schools to foster learning and creativity? At the end of the book, Robinson leaves the reader with the frequently invoked Gandhi quote, "Be the change you want to see." In other words, Robinson's critique and elaborate vision were the highlights of this book. Perhaps he will further detail his thoughts on a theory of change in a forthcoming book, or perhaps he is simply stating that elaborating a theory of change is up to us—teachers, students, parents, community members, and citizens—in our own unique contexts. In fact, this may be Robinson's way of telling us to go out and do the work. He calls the readers to go forth and become "those who move." In other words, become "change agents who can see the shape of a different future and are determined to bring it about through their own actions and by working with others" (p. 253).

As Robinson stated in his TED Talk, children are natural born learners. Thus, he encourages the reader to consider that the most pressing task for education reformers (transformers?) is to consider how we can better provide environment, opportunity, and support to grow learners. He states, "There must be an understanding of the nature of learning itself; how students learn best and the many different ways in which they do so. If schools get this wrong, everything else is just noise" (p. 73). Indeed, schools must give students opportunities to show how they learn best, and to demonstrate their interests and expertise. A creative school would allow students to better understand both the world around them, as well as the world within. If the focus of schooling is on growing diverse learners, then the teacher's role must also shift. Robinson poses that the teacher's role in creative schools is to facilitate learning. In one of many alliterative sets throughout the book, he suggests that teachers should engage, enable, expect, and empower. Furthermore, he notes succinctly that teaching and learning are a relationship.

Imagination is at the heart of the argument for creative schools. Imagination helps us to create, problem-solve, relate to others, and imagine futures. Robinson states, "Creativity is putting your imagination to work. It is applied imagination. Innovation is putting new ideas into practice" (p. 119). Creativity is about fresh thinking, and about passion. It is the opposite of discipline and control, and is not a linear process. Therefore, constructing a curriculum to encourage creativity is a significant departure from traditional curricular design. Without giving away too much here, Robinson lists a set of competencies that students would be expected to gain from a curriculum geared toward creativity, as well as a set of disciplines (he resists the use of "subjects" to describe areas of study) that he believes would represent a balanced curriculum. A school curriculum is built of four components: structure, content, mode, and ethos (p. 134). A necessary consideration for a transformed ethos would be to build in opportunities for students to fail and make mistakes. In this way, we would trust students to be natural learners, rather than controlling for every minute detail, and valuing success over all. While providing a history and critique of the current testing climate, Robinson is clear to state that he does believe in assessment. In his view, the end goal of assessment should be learning wherein "people reflect on their own thinking and diagnose how they've changed" (p. 178). There is also a chapter on school leadership, where Robinson describes considerations

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for creating a culture of learning in creative schools. Additionally, there is a chapter on connecting with the homes, parents, and communities of students.

Returning to the farming metaphor, Robinson's final suggestion is that a climate change is necessary. For the transformed schools that he hopes will become the norm, he states that we must foster health, nurture interdependent ecology, provide care, and promote fairness. He suggests that schools must shift from "command and control" to "climate control." Of all the metaphors in this book, this is the least effective. Though I understand the intention, the continued use of "control" seems out of place in a framework that highlights flexibility and dynamism. Additionally, climate control brings to mind inorganic images. Perhaps a better term might have been climate cultivation. Changing the climate will, necessarily, involve vision, skills, incentives, resources, and an action plan. As stated above, Robinson calls to "those who move" to start with his vision, and then gather the skills, incentives, resources to create a plan of action for their own educational settings and communities.

In sum, Sir Ken Robinson's new book "Creative Schools" elaborates a complex vision of what schools could be, and what type of learning could be encouraged. The book highlights the idea that transforming schools will not be a project that succeeds by changing one facet of education (i.e., testing). We must examine the foundational assumptions and purposes of education in order to transform the ways we think about teachers, students, curriculum, assessment, culture, leadership, and community. Throughout the book there are numerous lists of purposes, characteristics, and considerations for each of these components of education, which were all alliterative (i.e., diversity, depth, dynamism) with the perceived intent of helping the reader to remember each list. These became a bit tedious and confusing throughout the book. They seemed to be an unnecessary addition on top of the rich descriptions Robinson provided. In the end, however, I appreciated that he was writing about a complex, non-linear, and dynamic vision. The structure and culture of creative schools will vary based on the particular strengths, resources, and needs of each context and community. I finished the book understanding that complexity is at the heart of the transformation that Robinson proposes, and is something that "those who move" will need to embrace as change agents who trust students to learn.

Reviewer details

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