

# Ken Robinson: Bring on the Learning Revolution (2010)

Four years after [his speech on creativity](#) and education, [Ken Robinson](#) argues for revolution, not reform, in education.

From [the amazing TED lectures](#): talks from the TED (Technology, Entertainment, Design) Conference, where leading thinkers talk on science, business, development and the arts.

Ken Robinson:

Al Gore spoke at the TED conference I spoke at four years ago and talked about the climate crisis. And I referenced that at the end of my last talk. So I want to pick up from there because I only had 18 minutes, frankly. So, as I was saying...

(Laughter)

You see, he's right. I mean, there is a major climate crisis, obviously, and I think if people don't believe it, they should get out more. (Laughter) But I believe there's a second climate crisis, which is as severe, which has the same origins, and that we have to deal with with the same urgency. And I mean by this – and you may say, by the way, “Look, I'm good. I have one climate crisis; I don't really need the second one.” But this is a crisis of, not natural resources – though I believe that's true – but a crisis of human resources.

I believe fundamentally, as many speakers have said during the past few days, that we make very poor use of our talents. Very many people go through their whole lives having no real sense of what their talents may be, or if they have any to speak of. I meet all kinds of people who don't think they're really good at anything.

Actually, I kind of divide the world into two groups now. Jeremy Bentham, the great utilitarian philosopher, once spiked this argument. He said, "There are two types of people in this world: those who divide the world into two types and those who do not." (Laughter) Well, I do. (Laughter)

I meet all kinds of people who don't enjoy what they do. They simply go through their lives getting on with it. They get no great pleasure from what they do. They endure it rather than enjoy it and wait for the weekend. But I also meet people who love what they do and couldn't imagine doing anything else. If you said to them, "Don't do this anymore," they'd wonder what you were talking about. Because it isn't what they do, it's who they are. They say, "But this is me, you know. It would be foolish for me to abandon this, because it speaks to my most authentic self." And it's not true of enough people. In fact, on the contrary, I think it's still true of a minority of people. I think there are many

possible explanations for it. And high among them is education, because education, in a way, dislocates very many people from their natural talents. And human resources are like natural resources; they're often buried deep. You have to go looking for them, they're not just lying around on the surface. You have to create the circumstances where they show themselves. And you might imagine education would be the way that happens, but too often it's not. Every education system in the world is being reformed at the moment and it's not enough. Reform is no use anymore, because that's simply improving a broken model. What we need – and the word's been used many times during the course of the past few days – is not evolution, but a revolution in education. This has to be transformed into something else.

(Applause)

One of the real challenges is to innovate fundamentally in education. Innovation is hard because it means doing something

that people don't find very easy, for the most part. It means challenging what we take for granted, things that we think are obvious. The great problem for reform or transformation is the tyranny of common sense; things that people think, "Well, it can't be done any other way because that's the way it's done."

I came across a great quote recently from Abraham Lincoln, who I thought you'd be pleased to have quoted at this point. (Laughter) He said this in December 1862 to the second annual meeting of Congress. I ought to explain that I have no idea what was happening at the time. We don't teach American history in Britain. (Laughter) We suppress it. You know, this is our policy. (Laughter) So, no doubt, something fascinating was happening in December 1862, which the Americans among us will be aware of.

But he said this: "The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise with the occasion." I love that. Not rise to it, rise with it. "As our case is new, so we must think anew and act anew. We must disenthrall ourselves, and then we shall save our country."

I love that word, "disenthrall." You know what it means? That there are ideas that all of us are enthralled to, which we simply take for granted as the natural order of things, the way things are. And many of our ideas have been formed, not to meet the circumstances of this century, but to cope with the circumstances of previous centuries. But our minds are still hypnotized by them, and we have to disenthrall ourselves of some of them. Now, doing this is easier said than done. It's very hard to know, by the way, what it is you take for granted. (Laughter) And the reason is that you take it for granted.

So let me ask you something you may take for granted. How many of you here are over the age of 25? That's not what I think you take for granted, I'm sure you're familiar with that

already. Are there any people here under the age of 25? Great. Now, those over 25, could you put your hands up if you're wearing your wristwatch? Now that's a great deal of us, isn't it? Ask a room full of teenagers the same thing. Teenagers do not wear wristwatches. I don't mean they can't or they're not allowed to, they just often choose not to. And the reason is, you see, that we were brought up in a pre-digital culture, those of us over 25. And so for us, if you want to know the time you have to wear something to tell it. Kids now live in a world which is digitized, and the time, for them, is everywhere. They see no reason to do this. And by the way, you don't need to do it either; it's just that you've always done it and you carry on doing it. My daughter never wears a watch, my daughter Kate, who's 20. She doesn't see the point. As she says, "It's a single function device." (Laughter) "Like, how lame is that?" And I say, "No, no, it tells the date as well." (Laughter) "It has multiple functions."

But, you see, there are things we're enthralled to in education. Let me give you a couple of examples. One of them is the idea of linearity: that it starts here and you go through a track and if you do everything right, you will end up set for the rest of your life. Everybody who's spoken at TED has told us implicitly, or sometimes explicitly, a different story: that life is not linear; it's organic. We create our lives symbiotically as we explore our talents in relation to the circumstances they help to create for us. But, you know, we have become obsessed with this linear narrative. And probably the pinnacle for education is getting you to college. I think we are obsessed with getting people to college. Certain sorts of college. I don't mean you shouldn't go to college, but not everybody needs to go and not everybody needs to go now. Maybe they go later, not right away.

And I was up in San Francisco a while ago doing a book signing. There was this guy buying a book, he was in his 30s. And I said, "What do you do?" And he said, "I'm a fireman."

And I said, "How long have you been a fireman?" He said, "Always. I've always been a fireman." And I said, "Well, when did you decide?" He said, "As a kid." He said, "Actually, it was a problem for me at school, because at school, everybody wanted to be a fireman." He said, "But I wanted to be a fireman." And he said, "When I got to the senior year of school, my teachers didn't take it seriously. This one teacher didn't take it seriously. He said I was throwing my life away if that's all I chose to do with it; that I should go to college, I should become a professional person, that I had great potential and I was wasting my talent to do that." And he said, "It was humiliating because he said it in front of the whole class and I really felt dreadful. But it's what I wanted, and as soon as I left school, I applied to the fire service and I was accepted." And he said, "You know, I was thinking about that guy recently, just a few minutes ago when you were speaking, about this teacher," he said, "because six months ago, I saved his life." (Laughter) He said, "He was in a car wreck, and I pulled him out, gave him CPR, and I saved his wife's life as well." He said, "I think he thinks better of me now."

(Laughter)

(Applause)

You know, to me, human communities depend upon a diversity of talent, not a singular conception of ability. And at the heart of our challenges – (Applause) At the heart of the challenge is to reconstitute our sense of ability and of intelligence. This linearity thing is a problem.

When I arrived in L.A. about nine years ago, I came across a policy statement – very well-intentioned – which said, "College begins in kindergarten." No, it doesn't. (Laughter) It doesn't. If we had time, I could go into this, but we don't. (Laughter) Kindergarten begins in kindergarten. (Laughter) A friend of mine once said, "You know, a three

year-old is not half a six year-old.” (Laughter) (Applause)  
They’re three.

But as we just heard in this last session, there’s such competition now to get into kindergarten – to get to the right kindergarten – that people are being interviewed for it at three. Kids sitting in front of unimpressed panels, you know, with their resumes, (Laughter) flipping through and saying, “Well, this is it?” (Laughter) (Applause) “You’ve been around for 36 months, and this is it?” (Laughter) “You’ve achieved nothing – commit. Spent the first six months breastfeeding, the way I can see it.” (Laughter) See, it’s outrageous as a conception, but it [unclear].

The other big issue is conformity. We have built our education systems on the model of fast food. This is something Jamie Oliver talked about the other day. You know there are two models of quality assurance in catering. One is fast food, where everything is standardized. The other are things like Zagat and Michelin restaurants, where everything is not standardized, they’re customized to local circumstances. And we have sold ourselves into a fast food model of education, and it’s impoverishing our spirit and our energies as much as fast food is depleting our physical bodies.

(Applause)

I think we have to recognize a couple of things here. One is that human talent is tremendously diverse. People have very different aptitudes. I worked out recently that I was given a guitar as a kid at about the same time that Eric Clapton got his first guitar. You know, it worked out for Eric, that’s all I’m saying. (Laughter) In a way, it did not for me. I could not get this thing to work no matter how often or how hard I blew into it. (Laughter) It just wouldn’t work.

But it’s not only about that. It’s about passion. Often, people are good at things they don’t really care for. It’s

about passion, and what excites our spirit and our energy. And if you're doing the thing that you love to do, that you're good at, time takes a different course entirely. My wife's just finished writing a novel, and I think it's a great book, but she disappears for hours on end. You know this, if you're doing something you love, an hour feels like five minutes. If you're doing something that doesn't resonate with your spirit, five minutes feels like an hour. And the reason so many people are opting out of education is because it doesn't feed their spirit, it doesn't feed their energy or their passion.

So I think we have to change metaphors. We have to go from what is essentially an industrial model of education, a manufacturing model, which is based on linearity and conformity and batching people. We have to move to a model that is based more on principles of agriculture. We have to recognize that human flourishing is not a mechanical process; it's an organic process. And you cannot predict the outcome of human development. All you can do, like a farmer, is create the conditions under which they will begin to flourish.

So when we look at reforming education and transforming it, it isn't like cloning a system. There are great ones, like KIPP's; it's a great system. There are many great models. It's about customizing to your circumstances and personalizing education to the people you're actually teaching. And doing that, I think, is the answer to the future because it's not about scaling a new solution; it's about creating a movement in education in which people develop their own solutions, but with external support based on a personalized curriculum.

Now in this room, there are people who represent extraordinary resources in business, in multimedia, in the Internet. These technologies, combined with the extraordinary talents of teachers, provide an opportunity to revolutionize education. And I urge you to get involved in it because it's vital, not just to ourselves, but to the future of our children. But we have to change from the industrial model to an agricultural

model, where each school can be flourishing tomorrow. That's where children experience life. Or at home, if that's where they choose to be educated with their families or their friends.

There's been a lot of talk about dreams over the course of this few days. And I wanted to just very quickly ... I was very struck by Natalie Merchant's songs last night, recovering old poems. I wanted to read you a quick, very short poem from W. B. Yeats, who some of you may know. He wrote this to his love, Maud Gonne, and he was bewailing the fact that he couldn't really give her what he thought she wanted from him. And he says, "I've got something else, but it may not be for you."

He says this: "Had I the heavens' embroidered cloths, Enwrought with gold and silver light, The blue and the dim and the dark cloths Of night and light and the half-light, I would spread the cloths under your feet: But I, being poor, have only my dreams; I have spread my dreams under your feet; Tread softly because you tread on my dreams." And every day, everywhere, our children spread their dreams beneath our feet. And we should tread softly.

Thank you.

(Applause)

Thank you very much.