Book Reviews

Out of our minds: learning to be creative
Ken Robinson

This book is aimed at anyone with an interest in education and what it should look like in the 21st century. In particular, it calls on leaders of all organisations, including schools and universities, to engage everyone in the creative life of their organisation, in order to build a culture of imagination, creativity and innovation, where there are no stupid questions and where everyone can discover and develop their own natural intelligence. Robinson very consciously focuses on creativity across all disciplines and activities, on the need for collaboration beyond the boundaries of individual subjects.

In 1998, Robinson led a national commission on creativity, education and the economy. *All our futures: creativity, culture and education*, published in 1999, was a rallying cry for educationalists to consider the place of creativity in the school curriculum and its importance in the economic and cultural life of the country. To his dismay, *All our futures* was persistently referred to by politicians as 'the arts report' and it could be argued that this led to it being marginalised and the important changes he was urging ten years ago still needing to be effected. The first edition of *Out of our minds* followed two years later, picking up on these same themes, as did Robinson's Technology, Entertainment and Design (TED) conference talks in 2006 and 2010. Robinson has revisited this book ten years on, in the light of huge changes in the world happening at an ever-increasing pace – in technology, the economy, the environment and culture – changes that he still does not see being reflected in the world of education.

This book argues that in a world of rapid change and multiple challenges, the ability to think creatively, to imagine different possibilities, generate ideas, make judgements, be prepared to fail and try again, are among our best resources. However, we are squandering these resources because young people at present leave education with no idea at all of their own creative abilities. It goes further and says that education systems stifle children's innate creative confidence; that we educate creativity out of them. It suggests that our current education system is built on two pillars, dating back to the Industrial Revolution and the Enlightenment. The first is economic, supplying the labour needs of an industrial economy based on engineering, manufacturing and related trades. This has led to an educational hierarchy of subjects seen as useful/not useful, from the sciences and maths at the top of the heap to the arts at the bottom, with consequent levels of funding, timetabling allocation and teacher status. The second is intellectual, encompassing an idea of academic ability being synonymous with intelligence and that this is traditionally measured through forms of testing.

Robinson says that, to be fit for purpose in the future, we need to rethink some of our basic ideas about education, intelligence and ourselves. He sees education as developing individual talents and sensibilities; deepening our understanding of the world; and providing the skills required to earn a living and be economically productive. These three roles should be promoted equally and in relation to each other. We are urged to take account of the findings of authors like Howard Gardner, that intelligence is multifaceted, rich, complex and highly diverse. The book suggests that lip service is being paid to this work in schools and in teacher training but that in reality the old hierarchies, under political pressure for school improvement and higher standards of academic achievement, are still very much in place.

This is a very readable book, often humorous, but with a powerful sense of crusade, a *cri de cœur* for change in the way we educate our young people. Its message is not new (successive governments regularly trot out the word 'creativity'), but the fact that it still needs repeating after ten years suggests that change is very slow in coming and that the will to help our children find what excites them and motivates them, giving

them the skills to control their chosen medium and be 'in their element', can be swallowed up in the desire to maintain status on a league table or an Ofsted scale. Employers say they want young people who can think creatively, who can innovate, who can communicate well, work in teams and be adaptable and self-confident. The need is for schools to cultivate a broad curriculum, offering breadth and depth, a flexible range of teaching styles – traditional and progressive – and a real sense of making the learning personal to each student.

I would recommend this book particularly to those at the beginning of their teaching career, to inspire them to cultivate creative relationships with their students, between disciplines and between school and the wider community: 'The price of failure is more than we can afford, while the benefits of success are more than we can imagine.'

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The future of community
Edited by Dave Clements, Alastair Donald, Martin Earnshaw and Austin Williams
London: Pluto Press, 2008
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This book is of general interest as well as being useful and informative reading for researchers interested in this field. Although published three years ago, it touches on the very topical issues of David Cameron's 'Big Society' and Boris Johnson's 'Team London'. It sets out to challenge current perceptions of community, the loss of a sense of community and the idea that community is inherently a good thing. Each of the book's four chapters contains a selection of short essays from different contributors. The contributors come from a diverse range of backgrounds and their work derives from their interest in the Future of Community Festival organised by the Future Cities Project.

The barely disguised cynicism and humour of the introduction gets the reader interested. The book is well structured , each of its chapters having a specific focus around separate notions of community: 'In search of community', 'Constructing communities', 'Communities in flux' and 'Undermining communities'. The short essays within each chapter are easy to read

and digest, and in most cases illustrate their points very clearly. Each essay critiques the way in which various political interventions and/or manipulations and policies, in their effort to promote community, can be seen as actually undermining communities and the individuals within them.

After reading this book, you are left with an overshadowing sense of 'Big Brother'. Several arguments are put forward to support this: that there is now a dependency on authority which prevents people in communities from managing their own affairs as they did in the past; that policy-makers have effectively disenfranchised individuals and communities by creating a culture of fear (CRBs, CCTV, ASBOs) and in so doing have undermined the role of the adult in communities, which has in turn led to managing rather than socialising young people; that even architects and town planners in their efforts to create communities through their design of public spaces and buildings are in fact undermining the very notion of real community.

The book is very thought-provoking; it deconstructs the impact of numerous government initiatives and the efforts being made to re-engage individuals into community life. It is suggested that these interventions are in fact hampering individuals from having the freedom to make their own decisions as they are being manipulated into regaining a sense of community by policy-makers, thus negating the very idea of communality. However, in order that we do not lose all hope of ever being able to manage our communities without government 'support', the book cites the Italian community in San Francisco and the Brazilian community in County Galway as two real examples of healthy, well-functioning communities that appear to have survived precisely because of the lack of intervention from policy-makers. The very good point is made that the political class often ignores the fact that people have 'a natural propensity for friendship'.

The topic of 'community' has been well covered in this book which provides a good insight into the theory behind this subject. It is a very good starting point for those wishing to engage in a wider debate, that is to say one that is more critical of the arguments being advanced by the contributors to this book. As a newcomer to this topic, I really enjoyed reading this book. I found myself agreeing with much of its content and look forward to reading the counter-arguments which will surely follow.

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E-learning: concepts and practice
Bryn Holmes and John Gardner
London: Sage, 2006
ISBN 1-412911-11-7

This book offers an introduction to the key aspects of e-learning both for a general readership and for students, academics and education professionals. Defined as 'online access to learning resources, anywhere and anytime', e-learning is presented as the 'mission critical' for today's education systems to educate a workforce for a globalised world where knowledge-based economies need flexible, independent learners, competent with technology. Drawing on examples from around the globe, Holmes and Gardner examine existing and future e-learning approaches, and explore the implications of applying e-learning in practice. Topics include the historical background and theories underpinning e-learning; educational evolution; enriching the learning process; extended learning; empowering learning; evolving theories of learning; emancipatory learning; and the building of communities of learners.

The authors acknowledge the irony of presenting the possibilities of e-learning as an interactive, connected medium within the pages of a book, but deal with this by including 'breakout boxes' throughout the book which provide the reader with useful opportunities to look at practical examples of e-learning on selected websites and online activities.

As a starting point, the framework of practice for e-learning is introduced as a 'flower-petal' non-hierarchical framework of key practices and skills: searching and selecting; exploring; testing; analysing and synthesising; collaboration and sharing; understanding and application; and creating and promoting new knowledge. There is discussion of the resonance with Bloom's Taxonomy, developed in the 1950s at a time of very formal and didactic approaches to education. Since then, major changes including the rise in learner-centred education, the onset of mass education and the emergence of new technologies in education have impacted massively on the needs of learners and learning, particularly the implications of using connected technologies to access the vast resource of 8 billion web pages that is the internet. Collaboration is identified as being central to the assimilation of new knowledge and understandings.

The strength of the book lies in its apparent simplicity, built around a very clear structure. The initial orientation into the topic of e-learning as a general overview, followed by a 'potted history' of e-learning, give a good sense of how education has got to this point, and how e-learning has the potential to revolutionise still further our approaches to learning. A well-written chapter on 'E-learning theory – communal constructivism' looks at three overlapping theoretical underpinnings of e-learning: behaviourism, cognitivism and socio-constructivism. In this new mode of learning and the wider concept of the learner, communal constructivism is presented as the key extension to socio-constructivist theory, in which networked learners not only construct and assimilate their own knowledge from their own learning opportunities, but deliberately contribute their own learning to a community resource base. Subsequent chapters explore ways in which e-learning activities and resources can be used to scaffold thinking and provide 'cognitive apprenticeships' where novices and experts interact. The challenge of accessibility for communities of learners with special access difficulties is given a dedicated chapter, supported once again by references to practical examples which will be welcomed by those planning to incorporate elements of technology into their programmes.

The final chapter explores future possibilities and challenges of the social and technological dimensions of e-learning. This is a huge topic to attempt to capture within a few pages, but the sections on the challenges of assessment, the potential for e-learning as a transformative technology capable of catalysing change not just in education but in society, and the concluding thoughts on aspirations, entitlements and rights of access for citizens of developing nations stand out as being well worth a read.

This book is recommended as an introductory text for both teachers and students of education who are preparing to engage with e-learning both with pupils and for professional development purposes.

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Brilliant secondary school teacher – what you need to know to be a truly outstanding teacher
David Torn and Peter Bennett
London: Pearson, 2011
ISBN 978-0-273-73564-9

An honest and refreshing look at the skills and qualities required to be an effective practitioner in the secondary school environment, this book strikes a balance between providing a manual for recent entrants to the teaching profession who wish to be the very best and serving as a refresher for experienced colleagues without 'teaching grandma to suck eggs'. Even the most hard-boiled staffroom cynic will find that this book encourages reflection, highlights what is already being done well in the classroom and then, more importantly, leads the reader on to consideration of how things could be done even better for the benefit of our students. The real power of the book is that Torn and Bennett have placed the craft of teaching in the hands of those to whom it rightly belongs: teachers Pete Henshaw's foreword provides a rallying call to all in the classroom, and an important reminder of the reasons that most teachers come into the profession. Like much of the rest of the book, the foreword gives teaching back to teachers, acknowledging the skill and professionalism that they display lesson after lesson, day after day. The use of the word brilliant in the title is no accident; Torn and Bennett make a brave move away from the language of Ofsted, in a book aimed at a profession obsessed with meeting the latest inspection criteria. This book is focused on students and has at its core a refreshing return to the classroom; it acknowledges the experience of colleagues who have worked through endless initiatives and strategies, while providing easily accessible lists of the habits of 'brilliant teachers' alongside hints and tips, ready for classroom use by both experienced colleagues and those new to teaching.

Not solely focused on the classroom, the book demystifies many of the strategies and initiatives imposed on the profession in recent years, returning them to their rightful status as tools for teachers to use in order to support their professional practice. Data is often a source of fear for teachers. They are worried that failure of a student to attain a predicted grade could result in a less favourable Performance Management review or stop them crossing onto the Upper Pay Spine. Data is described 'more as a guide than as an infallible truth'. The three-part lesson plan is described as 'a useful tool but no more-. Torn and Bennett have given teachers back what Michael Marland once described as 'The craft of the classroom' and empowered us to use as our tools many of the strategies that were previously used, not because they were the most effective for a particular group of students at a particular stage in their learning, but because simply using them was seen as 'good' regardless of whether they had an impact on our particular students at all. The positive attitude to classroom practice and teacher professionalism demonstrated in the book is perhaps best summed up in the quotation: 'planning is something teachers do in order to help students learn. It isn't something they do in order to keep line managers off their backs!'

Brilliant secondary school teacher – what you need to know to be a truly outstanding teacher both challenges and empowers teachers to work with and master the range of tools at our disposal, gives back to us the ownership of classroom strategies and empowers us with the professionalism to use them not because Ofsted tells us to, but because it makes for a 'brilliant' classroom experience for our students.

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