



RETHINK EVERYTHING:

Sparking Transformational Conversations in Your School

By Karen Bronson

“The fact is that given the challenges we face, education doesn't need to be reformed – it needs to be transformed.”

– Ken Robinson

We are living in a time of unprecedented change, both within and outside of our schools. In *The Principal: Three Keys to Maximizing Impact*, Michael Fullan describes an “..unplanned digital revolution that is so volatile that it cannot be controlled in any traditional sense of the word.” He describes the push and pull factors that we are experiencing firsthand in our educational systems: the fact that schooling is increasingly boring for students and alienating for teachers and the pull of the ever more alluring digital world.



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His solution to the current instability will encompass four criteria: curriculum that is “irresistibly engaging” for students and teachers, “elegantly efficient and easy” from a technical standpoint to use, “technologically ubiquitous 24/7” and “steeped in real-life problem solving.”

Wow. This is not tinkering we are talking about. This is a sea change. This is transformation from the ground up that requires the rethinking of most if not all of the traditional tenets that have supported our aging



and obsolete educational models. Ken Robinson likens this to moving from “..what is essentially an industrial model of education, a manufacturing model, which is based on linearity and conformity and batching people ... “ to a model that creates the conditions for our learners and teachers to flourish.

If we can agree to acknowledge that the world has indeed changed over the last ten years, not to mention twenty, thirty or forty, we have to also acknowledge that inside some of our schools, it’s still 1972 (‘62? ‘52?) only with a Smartboard that replaced the whiteboard that replaced the green board that replaced the blackboard. A grown-up is talking in front of the room. Students are listening to varying degrees, reading, writing, saying things, using some iPads what is being covered will be tested and regurgitated in some form, a grade will be assigned based on what the teacher now knows kids did or did not know all along, the grade will go in the book and everyone will march on because there is just so much to cover.

Perhaps the most difficult part of the time that we are living in now in our schools is that we are trying, honestly trying, to change in the interest of kids and the vision of “student centered learning” our teaching rubrics demand. However, we are trying to do new things within the same tired and rigid frameworks: a day Ken Robinson describes as arranged into “standard units of time, marked out by the ringing of bells, much like a factory... Students educated in batches, according to age, as if the most important thing they have in common is their date of manufacture.”

What we end up doing is tinkering around the edges (which is really what educational “reform” is about, which is why it fails) rather than thinking about how schools and learning need to be transformed by rethinking long established practices

from bygone days from the ground up. Homework is a great example of the difference between tinkering and transforming. This soul-crushing juggernaut, which has the power to disrupt family life and cause unparalleled angst on a nightly basis (with no established benefits to learning) is a practice that needs deep review. Yet in school districts where the issue rises to the top as a priority for review, a typical approach is to form a committee and see how new “policies” for the old wine can be poured into new bottles. Perhaps the committee recommends “guidelines” for the amount of homework in different grades: a half hour in fourth grade, an hour in sixth grade,

etc. None of this works because the “guidelines” are absolutely meaningless and unenforceable for a myriad of reasons, and nothing changes. The real questions about the purpose of homework and the human feelings around it (teachers afraid that they will look bad compared to their colleagues if they assign little or none, the inequity of the playing fields at home with regard to the level of parental “support,” the dark side of homework co-ops where groups of students rotate doing it for others to copy) are never addressed in the tinkering designed to look like action. Rather, the conversation about transforming homework by flipping instruction, redefining the goal and purpose of homework, changing the way homework compliance “counts,” and collaboratively designing homework that truly promotes learning is where the real conversation needs to be.

This is the time to question and rethink everything from homework to the way the furniture looks and is arranged in classrooms, to one-size-fits-all academic models and pathways, to school cultures that “stigmatize mistakes and result in educating people out of their creative capacities” (Ken Robinson), to the way our teachers learn and grow professionally.

So where to start? Perhaps by getting the conversation started about a few of the biggest and most deeply embedded bedrocks. Rather than purporting to have all the answers, starting with the hard questions around a topic is often the best way to start the conversation. So, for a topic like rethinking traditional approaches to grading, some of the starting questions might be:

- How do we separate assessing learning from assessing compliance?
- How do we ensure that we are assessing work that the student himself or herself actually did?
- Why is retesting a regular part of big important things in real life (driving tests, professional certifications, licensing) but so absent in schools?



- What are grades for? Are we worried that students wouldn't comply without the threat of a poor grade hanging over their head? What does that say about the quality of instruction and where does that leave kids who don't care about grades?
- Would a coach look at a young baseball player's swing and say, "That's a B+. Next."? How do we give growth-focused feedback to students?
- What place do zeroes or late penalties have in a grading system that measures learning?
- If four seventh-grade math teachers use the same curriculum, but make up their own tests individually, with some giving credit for covering the book, and four students from four of their classes all end up with a B on their report card, does that grade mean anything? How can we move from idiosyncratic individually created teacher tests to common formative assessments that are the result of collaborative efforts? What could I, as the school leader, do to create the conditions so that this could happen?
- How do we move from a traditional grading paradigm where mistakes are punished and students are judged with grades while still learning to one that reinforces a growth mindset, promotes learned optimism and perseverance? (*Rethinking Grading*, Cathy Vatterott)
- What schools around us have made the transition to standards-based grading, and what are they learning? How can we learn from them?

Or, making the Move to Project-Based Learning

- How did Crellin Elementary School, a small, rural K-5 school in Oakland, Maryland, take hands-on, project-based learning to a level that extends far beyond one or two projects a year to inspire a growing population of students

from economically disadvantaged backgrounds? How did these efforts result in Crellin being an Intel School of Distinction, the Maryland State Assessment Top-Performing Elementary School, and the winner of the Ernest L. Boyer Best Practices Award for Character Education? (<http://www.edutopia.org/school/crellin-elementary-school>)

- Why do we persist in focusing on our old toolbox of disciplinary consequences to manage behavior rather than seeking radically different instructional approaches that engage even the most reluctant students?
- What schools around us are making the transition to PBL, and what are they learning? How can we learn from them?

After the questions, seeking out the most current learning around the topic is a next step. For the grading question, this could mean bringing in the work of thought leaders like Tom Guskey, Ken O'Connor, Cathy Vatterott, Myron Dueck, and others. Look for video clips that bring the questions into focus and use them at any opportunity: administrative team, faculty team, or parent meetings to spark awareness and discussion. Look for small steps in these resources that some will be willing to take to keep the learning going and the topic on the front burner. Here's an example: Leah Alcala teaches seventh- and eighth-grade math. She has made one small change that has big payback in getting students to focus on learning rather than grading. See how she does it at <https://www.teachingchannel.org/videos/math-test-grading-tips>.

Taking continual actions to nudge thinking that brings us closer to the realization that our schools need to change to engage today's students is essential. Here are two video stories that are sure to prompt thinking and discussion:

- Watch Ken Robinson's TED talk: "Do Schools Kill Creativity?" (https://www.ted.com/talks/ken_robinson_says_schools_kill_

creativity?language=en) and then follow up with excerpts from his book, *Creative Schools*.

- "The Rule": the story of how St. Benedict's Prep in Newark, NJ, reinvented itself to meet the needs of a new population and now achieves nearly 100 percent college acceptance for inner-city boys (<http://www.pbs.org/show/rule/>) or the *60 Minutes* feature (<http://www.sbp.org/60Minutes>).
- Read *Transforming Brockton High School*, Sue Szachowicz's story of how perseverance and true collaboration over time transform a troubled high school – and meet Sue at the SAANYS Annual Conference in October! (<http://bit.ly/1TgNOUD>)
- Watch Operation Lighthouse Rescue (Nova) (<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/tech/lighthouse-rescue.html>) to see how the saving move of the Gay Head Lighthouse in Martha's Vineyard was accomplished through a team using problem-based learning in its purest form. Show it to students and the grown-ups to spark conversation about the difference between abstract and applied learning.

Transformational change in schools will not happen easily or quickly, but it is already happening in your schools and schools nearby in transformational conversations that spark thought that ignites action. Get the conversations going in your school by asking tough questions and finding the resources that hold some answers. It is leadership at its finest.

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