

A DOWNSTREAM PROBLEM

A keynote speech by Professor Ken Robinson

Based on 'All Our Futures', the government report into creative and cultural education, Ken Robinson highlighted the consequences of years of limited and unimaginative arts activity in schools. He put forward a powerful case for the integration of a new and different form of arts education into the school curriculum.

The experience of being in school was a tedious one for many: a sense of containment, interspersed with odd moments of liberation – after school, when you can do things you like doing. One of the things that people have never done properly at school is ‘the arts’; and this is the problem that arts organisations are picking up now. Poor education in the arts leaves a ‘downstream’ problem for those working in the arts.

When Tony Blair came to power, he said he wanted to reform education. This was seen as an important response to social, cultural and technological change. A great opportunity to get the arts into the education system perhaps? Recognition that the arts should be at the centre of education policy, and also at the heart of social policy? But no. Instead, the emphasis was placed on ‘raising standards’.

In practice, this meant two things: firstly an emphasis on literacy. In 1998, arts and humanities were dropped from the primary school curriculum – completely – to concentrate on literacy. The problem is, when everyone is literate, what are they going to read? To concentrate only on literacy is to place the focus, wrongly, on where the problem occurs – not the source of the problem. People want to raise standards in literacy, but should we then drop everything else and do nothing but? The solution does not lie only there. Most systems are synergistic – they depend on the effective interaction of different parts.

Secondly, there was a renewed emphasis on the Tory ‘evaluation’ agenda – quantifiable, statistical measures to assess the achievements of schools. Ofsted was given more powers, and the terrible scourge of accountability in the public sector was compounded in the education system. It’s not that accountability is in itself bad – but this was a particular form of accountability, using quantifiable methods. Supposedly this helps raise standards. The problem is that, interesting though the numbers are, they don’t tell the whole story (or the real story, very often). People are confusing standards with standardisation.

Neither of these things is designed to inhibit the development of the arts, but they do. The arts are slipping further and further away – being squeezed out of the education system. Not that this is unusual. In a survey of arts education in 22 European countries, the arts were without exception at the margins of the curriculum. At the age of 14 kids drop the arts unless they are thought to be talented. These are the people that arts practitioners are trying to engage in the work that they do. They’ve come through a whole education system that has either not positively encouraged them to understand what the arts are, or has minimised their engagement with it. Why? Why do we have to spend so much time telling people how important the arts are? What are the barriers and why are they having to be torn down? There’s an implicit assumption in the theme of this conference that the arts, and the people who work in them, are somehow divided from everyone else. It’s true, but why? It’s because people’s attitudes towards the arts have been formed at school; and that leaves arts practitioners with a downstream problem when they try to engage with them.

In its report 'All Our Futures', the National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education – a group set up by Tony Blair to look at creativity and cultural development – has made a strong case for improved provision for cultural and creative education. But there's a problem when you start talking about the 'arts', because that word conjures up ideas in people's minds; and what they have in mind may not be what you have in mind. This is at the heart of the problem, and creates two conceptual barriers.

Firstly, there is confusion about the meaning of the word 'arts'. The school curriculum defines it as 'art and music' (with dance as a branch of PE and drama as an offshoot of English literature). This is completely wrong. Defining the arts as subject categories is a mistake: yet arts funding agencies do this all the time. 'Aesthetics' (the definition of art forms) is to artists what ornithology is to birds. It doesn't bother artists what it is they're doing – they just get on and do it. They often don't even know there's a category for what they do. It's only when you want to fund or promote what they do that you run into problems. Even the arts and science are no different in most ways. They are simply languages for exploring ourselves and the things around us. The only real difference between them is the type of understanding being sought. So subject labels for dance, drama, literature, etc., are unhelpful, particularly at a point in time when the Internet is about to change the potential of every form of arts practice.

The second conceptual barrier arises from the notion that there are some forms of art that are of enduring beauty and eloquence – 'high art' – but that 'popular culture' is shallow and ephemeral. Some forms of popular culture make no claims to be anything but ephemeral and shallow, but very often works of enduring beauty emerge through popular culture. And equally, works of enduring beauty and eloquence can be hugely popular. The division between high art and popularity is a complete misconception, and it doesn't help us at all in trying to frame artistic policies. Our conceptions of 'culture' and 'art' act as a barrier to us. We talk about engaging people in the arts, but what we mean is engaging them in the particular type of arts practice that we like. Lots of people are engaged in all kinds of aesthetic cultural practices, but we just don't define them as art in the first place – so we persist in spending a lot of time trying to engage them in the things that we happen to favour instead – which is why the school curriculum is so narrow in its conception of the arts.

Another barrier arises because of administrative problems we have in organising the arts. Every arts organisation in the country, more or less, has an education policy; but education is really the wrong word. Actors themselves are often refugees from education and shudder at the word. It's the word – not the activity. If you say 'education programme', they think it's to do with worthiness and civic duty.

Most arts organisations have two core functions: one to produce artistic work of the highest quality, and the other to engage the widest range of people in artistic work and deepen their understanding of it. That, in itself, is the education function. But if you call it education you make it sound marginal – like Wednesday afternoon teachers' workshops and schools programmes – but it is not marginal: it's a core function. What our arts organisations need is not two policies, artistic and education, but a single integrated cultural policy that describes the artistic mission of the organisation and the strategies through which it will be implemented, and people will become engaged with it. So education and marketing are dual functions – they need to be co-equal. The problem

is that when artistic directors set policies for their organisations, somewhere down the line the education department is expected to mediate it to other people. Another downstream problem.

In the end, the only way forward is to recognise that we need both conceptual and administrative solutions to tear down the barriers. Firstly, there has to be more debate about what the arts are and what they are for, and how they co-exist with other major areas of social culture like science, technology, politics and religion. They're not a separate part of social life, but in the mainstream. Secondly, there have to be internal programmes of management development. The problem is that institutions are inherently conservative. The trick in management terms is to keep them alive and flexible to new developments. Tearing down the barriers doesn't mean destroying the structure, but having a framework that is flexible and permeable to change. Some of these ideas are set out in 'All Our Futures', where we've tried to say, practically, what needs to be done.

Our task in the arts is to enable people to feel together and think for themselves; instead of thinking together, and feeling alone. Our entire formal education system has promoted the latter; so to make progress now, we have to recognise that the barriers are substantial. They can be overcome, because mostly they exist in mindsets. Overcoming those should begin in education, but must be carried forward vigorously in our national and local arts institutions.