I agree with Sir Ken Robinson’s criticism of modern education to a large extent. I think schools do suffocate the creativity of students, and this is evident in the Singapore education system.

My contention is that the Singapore education system is configured to gear students towards academic excellence. This is in line with its aim to “nurture every student to his fullest potential”, usually manifested as landing jobs with high qualifications such as lawyers, doctors or governmental leaders. This is reflected in Robinson’s speech that “our education system is predicated on the idea of academic ability”. As such, it is of top priority to achieve the best results possible, and the only way to do so for most subjects like the sciences and humanities would be to get “correct answers”, “absolute” and “fixed” answers. This “absolutism” in the important subjects does not allow any deviating answers, suppressing creativity in the process.

This suppression is further compounded by the fact that because the cost of not doing well can affect one’s future (such as not being able to enter a desired junior college or university), there is no room for mistakes. This whole idea is reflected in Robinson’s speech that “the most useful subjects for [your future] are at the top” and “mistakes are the worst things you can make”. A difference of just one point in the ‘O’ levels can affect your chances of getting into a premium JC, affecting the quality of education one receives and may ultimately affect one’s life. What is worse when it comes to learning is that some students have the propensity to “mug” or cram massive amounts of knowledge into their heads, synonymous with voluntary rote learning. How can creativity be nurtured this way?

While creativity is not very much prized or vital in mainstream schools (i.e. primary school up to junior college), there are some specialised schools in Singapore that do not kill creativity. An example would be the School of the Arts (SOTA), Singapore’s first independent, pre-tertiary arts school that aims to groom future generations of artists and creative professionals to become leaders in all fields, especially the arts. Creativity is vital when it comes to nurturing artistic talents or performing the arts, therefore students will be able to exercise their creativity more often. Here, creativity is more encouraged than suppressed. Hopefully, SOTA will be able to nurture people like Gillian Lynne or the likes.

In his speech, Robinson said that “if [one] is not prepared to be wrong, [one] will never come up with anything original”.