Every country on earth, at the moment, is reforming public education.

There are two reasons for it:
The first one is economic:
People are trying to work out, how do we educate our children to take their place in the economies of the 21st century? How do we do that?
Given that we can't anticipate what the economy will look like at the end of next week. As the recent turmoil has demonstrated.

The second one is cultural:
Every country on earth is trying to figure out how do we educate our children so they have a sense of cultural identity and so that we can pass on the cultural genes of our communities while being a part of the process of globalization? How do you square that circle?

The problem is they are trying to meet the future by doing what they did in the past. And on the way they are alienating millions of kids who don't see any purpose of going to school.

When we went to school, we were kept there with a story that, if you worked hard and did well and got a college degree, you would have a job. Our kids don't believe that, and they are right not to, by the way. You are better having a degree, than not, but it is not a guarantee anymore. And particularly not if the route to it marginalizes most of the things you think are important about yourself. Some people say we have to raise standards if this is a break through. You know, like really, yes, we should. (Audience laughing) Why would you lower them? I haven't come across an argument that persuades me to lower them. But raise them, of course we should raise them.

But the problem is the current system of education was designed and conceived and structured for a different age. It was conceived, in the intellectual culture of the enlightenment and in the economic circumstances of the industrial revolution.

Before the middle of the 19th century, there were no systems of public education. Not really, you could be educated by Jesuits if you had the money. But public education, paid for from taxation, compulsory to everybody and free at the point of delivery, that was a revolutionary idea.
And many people objected to it. They said it is not possible for many street kids, working class children, to benefit from public education. They are incapable to learn to read and write and why are we spending time on this?

So there is also built into it a whole series of assumptions about social structure and capacity. It was driven by an economic imperative of the time, but running right through it was an intellectual model of the mind.
Which was essentially the enlightenment view of intelligence. That real intelligence consists in this capacity for certain type of deductive reasoning. And the knowledge of the classics originally, which we come to think of as academic ability. This is deep in the gene pool of public education. There are two types of people, academic and non-academic. Smart people and non-smart people. And the conscience of that is that many brilliant people think they are not, because they are judged against this particular view of the mind.

So we have twin pillars, economic and intellectual. My view is, that this model has caused chaos in many people’s lives. It has been great for some, they have benefited wonderfully from it. But most people have not.

Instead they suffer this: The modern epidemic. It is as misplaced and as fictitious. This is the plague of ADHD. This is the map of the instance of ADHD in America, or prescriptions for ADHD. Don’t mistake me, I don’t mean to say there is no such thing as attention deficit disorder. I am not qualified to say there is not such a thing. I know that a great majority of psychologists and pediatricians think there is such a thing, but it is still a matter of debate.

What I do know for a fact, it is not an epidemic. These kids are being medicated as routinely as we had our tonsils taken out. And on the same whimsical basis and for the same reason, medical fashion.

Our children are living in the most intensely stimulating period in the history of the earth. They are being besieged with information that pulls their attention from every platform; from computers, iphones, advertising holdings, from hundreds of television channels. And are getting penalized for that, from getting distracted, from what? Boring stuff, for the most part. It seems to me, not a coincidence, totally, that the instance of ADHD has risen in parallel with the growth of standardized testing.

These kids are being given Ritalin and Adederall and all manner of things, often quite dangerous drugs, to get them focused and calm them down.

But according to this, attention deficit disorder increases as you travel East across the country. People start to lose interest in Oklahoma. (Audience laughing) They can hardly think straight in Arkansas. By the time they get to Washington they have lost it completely. And there are separate reasons for that, I believe. (Laughing)

It is a fictitious epidemic. If you think of it, the arts, I don’t say it exclusively of the arts, it is true of science and math, but I say about the arts in particular because they are the victims of this mentality, currently, particularly. The arts especially address the idea of aesthetic experiences. An aesthetic experience is one of which your senses are operating at their peak; When you are present in the current moment; When you are
resonating with the excitement of this thing you are experiencing; When you are fully alive.

A anesthetic is when you shut your senses off and deaden yourself to what is happening. And a lot of these drugs are that. We are getting our children through education by anesthetizing them. I think we should be doing the exact opposite. We shouldn't be putting them asleep. We should be waking them up, to what they have inside of themselves.

But the model we have is this: We have a situation that is modeled on the interest of industrialism and in the image of it.

I will give you some examples. Schools are still pretty much organized on factory lines: Ringing bells, separate facilities, specialized into separate subjects. We still educate children by batches. We put them through the system by age group. Why do we do that? Why is there this assumption that the most important things kids have in common is how old they are? It is like the most important thing about them is their date of manufacture.

I know kids who are much better than other kids at the same age in different disciplines. Or at different times of the day. Or better in smaller groups than larger groups. Or sometimes they want to be on their own.

If you are interested in the model of learning, you don't start from this production line mentality. It is essentially about conformity and it is increasingly about that as you look at the growth of standardized testing and standardized curriculum. It is about standardization. I believe we have to go in the exact opposite direction. That is what I mean about changing the paradigm.

There is a great study done recently of divergent thinking. Published a couple of years ago. Divergent thinking is not the same thing as creativity. I define creativity as the process of having original ideas that have value. Divergent thinking isn't a synonym, but it is an essential capacity for creativity. It is the ability to see lots of possible answers to a question. Lots of possible ways of interpreting a question. To think, what happened to Bono, probably called laterally. To think, not just in linear or convergent ways. To see multiple answers, not one.

There are tests for this. One cod example might be: People might be asked to say how many uses can you think of for a paper clip? Most people might come up with 10 - 15. People who are good at this might come up with 200. They do that by saying, can the paper clip be 200 foot tall and made out of foam rubber? Does it have to be a paper clip as we know it, Jim?

Now there are tests for this. They gave them to 1500 people in a book called *Break Point and Beyond*. On the protocol of the test, if you scored above a certain level, you
would considered to be a genius of divergent thinking. Okay. My question to you is: What percentage of the people tested, of the 1500, scored at genius level for divergent thinking? You need to know one more thing about them. These were kindergarten children. So what do you think? What percentage at genius level?

(male audience member answers 80%)

98%.

Now, the thing about this is this was a longitudinal study. So, they retested the same children 5 years later. Ages 8-10, what do you think? 50?

They retested them again, 5 years later, ages 13-15. You can see a trend here, can’t you?

Now, this tells an interesting story. Because you could have imagined it going the other way, couldn’t you? You start off not being very good, but you get better as you get older.

But this shows two things:
1. We all have this capacity.
2. It mostly deteriorates.

Now a lot of things have happened to these kids as they have grown up, a lot. But one of the most important things that has happened to them is, I am convinced, by now they have been educated. They have spent 10 years in school being told there is one answer, its at the back, and don’t look. And don’t copy, because that’s cheating. I mean outside school that is called collaboration. But inside schools...(Audience laughing)

This isn’t because teachers want it this way, it’s just because it happens that way. That is because it is in the gene pool of education. We have to think differently about human capacity. We have to get over this old conception called, academic, nonacademic, abstract, theoretical, vocational and see it for what it is, a myth.

Second, we have to recognize that most great learning happens in groups. The collaboration is the stuff of growth. If we atomize people and separate them and judge them separately, we form a kind of disjunction between them and their natural learning environment.

Thirdly, it is crucially about the culture of our institutions. The habits of institution and the habitats that they occupy.