

EDWARD DE BONO - A TRIBUTE

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My one ambition is that around the world
there should be a few more young people who come to say
'I am a thinker'. I would be even more pleased if some of them were to
go further and say:
'I am a thinker, and I enjoy thinking'
(Public Seminar, University of Malta).

Introduction

Professor Edward de Bono inspired so many people during his lifetime as he generously shared his ideas, both in Malta and all over the world. I will never forget my first encounter with him, thanks to the late Professor Peter Serracino Inglott (then University of Malta Rector), way back in 1992. They had invited me to set up The Edward de Bono Institute at the University of Malta. One of my first tasks was to organise an international conference in Malta. While this may seem to be a rather daunting task, particularly since I had never attended a conference, let alone organised one single-handed, yet I took on the challenge with bravado. Thanks to a great deal of hard work and to the reputation which Edward had already established, even in the pre-internet era, *The First International Conference on Creative Thinking* was a huge success at the University's Valletta Campus, with around 300 participants from all the four corners of the world. Five other international conferences and 16 Edward de Bono Seminars followed over the years.

Edward de Bono was born on 19 May 1933, in Malta. He passed away on 9 June 2021. It is an astonishing fact that a world-renowned thinker was born on one of the smallest island nation states in the world. Edward lived a rich and rewarding life. He travelled extensively around the world where he would share his inspirational ideas with world-leaders, people in business, educators, and with anyone else interested in learning more about his methods.

Edward was a prolific writer. He wrote a book, *Six Action Shoes* (1991), while travelling from London to New Zealand. He actually provides notes in the book on where exactly he happened to be, such as, for example, 30,000 feet above Kuala Lumpur. Edward spent the last few years of his life living in semi-retirement in Rabat in Malta. This is the small town where he lived with his family during the Second World War and close to his school in the old walled city of Mdina. Edward's Rabat apartment had an incredible view of the walls of the old city which are beautifully lit up at night.

Edward received numerous honorary degrees and honours during his lifetime. In Malta, he was honoured with the National Order of Merit, in 1995.

It was not easy to surprise Edward, mainly because surprises normally came from him. There was, however, one occasion when I saw Edward really and truly surprised. This was in April 1996 at a conference in the Netherlands when Patrick Colemont, who then headed the European Association for Creativity and Innovation, named a planet in honour of Edward.

Early years

Edward's parents were Joseph, a physician, and Josephine, a journalist who was instrumental in the women's suffrage movement in Malta in the 1940s. Josephine was instrumental in getting the vote for women in Malta in 1947. Agatha Barbara was the first female Member of Parliament. She later became Malta's first female President.

Edward was educated at St Edward's College in Malta, where he was a boarder and where he skipped two classes. His nickname in those days was 'Genius'. He was always very curious and inquisitive. While at school, he was the only student who was given a key to the school's laboratory so he could have access to it at any time he wished. He also took an active role in sporting events such as cricket, tennis, rowing and polo.

Edward joined the University of Malta's medical course aged only 15. He was one of the youngest persons ever to graduate in Medicine, although he had to wait until he was 21 to be awarded his degree. Medicine was a family tradition. One of his uncles, Pietru Pawl Debono, was a renowned surgeon and Government Minister of Health. Edward claimed to have selected medicine (rather than law) as it is a profession that may be practiced anywhere in the world. This choice certainly influenced his career progression a great deal.

In 1953 Edward was awarded the prestigious Rhodes scholarship to study Psychology at Christ Church College, University of Oxford. His education at Oxford, where he investigated the manner in which the human brain operates as a self-organising information patterning system, led to the publication of one of his most original, inspiring and influential books, *The Mechanism of Mind* (1969). In this publication he describes, often in metaphorical terms, how the human brain functions and how it processes information.

Education initiatives in Malta

Edward was always passionate when it came to education. He constantly promoted teaching thinking to children. His eyes would light up whenever he came into contact with them. I once invited him to a government secondary school in Cospicua, Malta, in the mid-1990s, where he spoke to girls in Year 1. They were delighted as they were permitted to communicate their ideas freely. They did so in English (rather than in Maltese) to the surprise of all the educators present. Some ideas were truly amazing, particularly the ones related to what they wanted to do after leaving school. On another occasion he delivered a session to all children in Year 4 at the Mediterranean Conference Centre. Once again, the children present had absolutely no fear of embarrassment or censure. Their hands were continuously raised and their ideas were extraordinary.

Thanks to the setting up of The Edward de Bono Institute for Creative Thinking and Innovation in 1992 at the University of Malta, a great deal has been achieved to promote thinking skills and creativity in Malta. Having started off by servicing various Faculties at the University of Malta, today the Institute offers its own PhD, Masters and Diploma Programmes.

The Institute successfully ran the *Kids on Campus* summer school for children aged 5 to 12 years at the University of Malta between July 1994 and September

2003. This summer school was based on de Bono's thinking skills, on creative thinking and on learning through play.

A 'Thinking Skills Programme' was set up in October 2000 and it ran until July 2011, with the collaboration of the Education Division in Malta. This involved the recruitment of trained and dedicated Thinking Skills teachers who introduced the de Bono methods into state schools in Malta. The teachers conducted action research during the first years of the programme, with very encouraging results (Mercieca and Pulis Xerxen, 2006). All PSD (Personal and Social Development) teachers in all state schools in Malta were also trained in the application of the de Bono Thinking Skills during this period.

The Institute is currently the official Host Organisation for *Global Entrepreneurship Week (GEW)*, an annual international celebration of entrepreneurship. It is also the national coordinator for *World Creativity and Innovation Week (WCIW)*, and it regularly participates in various national and international activities such as *Science in the City / Researchers' Night* and *SME Week*. There has, moreover, been active participation in various European funded projects under Horizon 2020, Lifelong Learning and Erasmus+ amongst others.

Edward constantly supported these initiatives. His original contributions to education, management and training allow for an interdisciplinary approach, with applications in areas ranging from education to medicine to management, IT, law and conflict resolution.

Lateral Thinking

Edward has been acknowledged as a creativity guru in all the four corners of the world. His reputation stems from his ability to deliver numerous workshops, publish over 80 books which have been translated into countless languages and establish a world-wide network of business trainers. He is often referred to as 'the Lateral thinking guru' and 'the father of Lateral Thinking' as he invented the concept of Lateral Thinking, a term which found its way into the Oxford Dictionary. His first publication with that term in the title was *The Use of Lateral Thinking* (1967). Lateral thinking is today directly associated with Edward de Bono and his work.

What is Lateral Thinking? Lateral Thinking stands in contrast to Vertical Thinking. The latter is generally defined as the solving of problems using

conventional thinking processes while making use of linear or logical thinking. This stands in contrast to lateral thinking which allows for the application of specific methods to generate new possibilities and positive value in a brief time span, eliminating the need to wait for inspiration or for the proverbial apple to fall on our head.

Lateral Thinking involves 'Seeking to solve problems by unorthodox or apparently illogical methods' (Concise Oxford Dictionary). Through the deliberate application of particular methods to change habitual responses, lateral thinking allows for the unleashing of unexpected and valuable ideas which are later acknowledged to be logical in hindsight. Lateral thinking disrupts established ways of thinking and it allows for information to be processed differently. As a result, novel perspectives are likely to emerge.

The lateral thinking tools which Edward de Bono designed, such as Random Input, Challenge and PO (provocative operation), simulate the process of inspiration or chance events in the brain. Our regular way of thinking allows for focus and for dealing with everyday events, problems and decisions. This is generally an efficient system, but Edward constantly advocated the importance of improving our thinking, using the expression that thinking is a skill which may be improved with practice. Lateral thinking complements and augments our regular way of thinking as it allows for the instigation of new ideas that not only act to resolve problems but which may also create opportunities or expose novel future possibilities. As Edward de Bono states:

'Creativity is not a mystical talent that some people have and others can only envy. Lateral thinking is the type of creative thinking that can be learned, practiced, and used by everyone. Some people will be better at it than others, as with any skill. Learning lateral thinking will not make everyone a genius, but it will supplement existing thinking skills with a valuable ability to generate new ideas' (1993a, p. 310).

Operacy

Operacy, which means the skill that one needs to do something and to set things in motion for action to occur, is another valuable concept which Edward de Bono promoted. He constantly advocated for operacy to be considered as a third gateway for success in formal education, together with literacy and numeracy. His argument was that not all children may be good at learning language or numerical skills, but they may be potentially excellent at thinking.

This was certainly evident during sessions which colleagues, students, educators and myself held in schools in Malta. It was often the case that pupils who were labelled as not being very intelligent, where literacy and numeracy were concerned, were excellent at thinking. The result was an increase in their self-esteem which allowed them to be less inhibited when communicating or sharing their ideas.

Parallel Thinking and Constructive Thinking

Edward de Bono's obsession with the futility of argumentation led him to create the term 'Parallel Thinking'. It is often assumed that idea generation is closely linked to problem solving and decision making. These involve argument and analysis and the tendency to get into a position where *I am right, you are wrong* (1990), which is the title of one of Edward de Bono's publications. Argument and analysis are useful and relevant in certain contexts, but there is a great deal more to thinking and reasoning than just argument and analysis.

The world-renowned 'Six Thinking Hats' were specifically designed to counteract the negative tendencies of argumentation and conflict. Use of the Six Hats allows for thinking to be focussed towards one particular direction at a time, moving from information, to positive issues, critical thinking, idea generation, intuitions and finally thinking about thinking which, more often than not, leads towards constructive conclusions.

Are lateral thinking or parallel thinking only used for problem solving or decision making? Lateral thinking and parallel thinking work in conjunction with our everyday thinking and act to augment it. Edward de Bono further advocated the application of constructive thinking which allows for the creation of original ideas in the absence of any pressing need to resolve a problem or take a decision. The value of constructive thinking is evident when considering the manner in which designers and manufacturers create new products or services which offer value that goes beyond mere necessity. New tablet and smartphone designs, for example, do not resolve any problems. Some may simply offer aesthetic enhancements. However, they gain popularity as a result of powerful and convincing marketing strategies.

Three categories

Although it is not easy to categorise anything that Edward de Bono has published, his books may be divided into three main categories. The first are

provocative books, some of which may sound preposterous at face value, but which embody a serious underlying message. The second are the books on education, mainly aimed at including 'the direct teaching of thinking' as a subject in school curricula. The third are business and self-help books that target the management market.

Provocative books

The provocative books include *Why I want to be King of Australia* (1999), where Edward attempts to motivate Australians to seriously think about their future in the 21st century. *The de Bono Code Book* (2000) addresses the inadequacy of language which is something that Edward felt very strongly about. The urgent need for new concepts and perceptions emerges clearly through the presentation of an international language with numbers representing various thoughts, concepts and perceptions.

H+ (plus) A New Religion? (2010) is another provocative piece of work. Here Edward de Bono proposes a framework for living by means of conscious positive actions (or 'pons') which result in a sense of achievement and an increase in self-esteem. This allows for enhanced self-confidence and the motivation to make the world a better place through changing outdated paradigms. Edward's originality and his fertile imagination are clearly at play here.

Bonting: Thinking to create value (2015), published in Malta by the Kite Group, is one of Edward de Bono's most recent books. The term *bonting*, which allows for the creation of value, is derived from the Latin word *bonum*, which means good. *Bonting* allows for the creation of areas where value may be added. A point of change or a desired state is used as a focus, and alternatives are generated as a way to achieve the anticipated state.

This publication also exhibits a number of provocative ideas. One of the suggestions he recommends is that there ought to be one moment in the day when people are allowed to propose ideas such as 'preposterous suggestions, crazy ideas and provocations. They need not be taken seriously. ... It would be like having a daily carnival' (pp. 293-94). The idea behind this is clear – too many crazy ideas which may contain value are unjustly censored, generally due to fear of rejection or unfair criticism. Some value, which could be of benefit for humanity, may emerge from them.

Education

In his early work, Edward de Bono focussed primarily on education as he strongly advocated the introduction of 'thinking' as a subject in schools, with some success in places such as Venezuela, Australia, Singapore and Malta. The CoRT (Cognitive Research Trust) Program, first published in 1976, is probably the most renowned educational resource produced. CoRT incorporates attention directing tools which enable the development of new and more effective thinking structures in the brain. The CoRT Program for schools consists of six programmes, CoRT 1 to CoRT 6, each of which comprises ten lessons (presented on workcards) and a workbook for educators. Although the entire CoRT Program consists of 60 lessons, only CoRT 1 and CoRT 4 are generally used. CoRT 1 provides educators with ten thinking tools, some of which are well known, such as the PMI (Plus, Minus, Interesting), CAF (Consider all Factors) or AGO (Aims, Goals, Objectives). CoRT 4 is based on creativity and it includes some Lateral Thinking tools, such as Random Input.

Edward's emphasis on teaching thinking directly through 'Thinking Lessons' is intended to focus on the process of thinking as opposed to the subject content. This allows for the transfer of the skills learnt to other practical contexts. Moreover, 'in today's information age, thinking skills are viewed as crucial for educated persons to cope with a rapidly changing world. Many educators believe that specific knowledge will not be as important to tomorrow's workers and citizens as the ability to learn and make sense of new information' (Gough 1991, p. 1).

Most of de Bono's educational publications, such as *Teach your child how to think* (1992) and *Teach yourself to think* (1995) include various practical exercises which could be used in schools. Edward's focus on improving thinking was so strong that he even advocated the setting up of Thinking Clubs (see for example *de Bono's Thinking Course* (1982) pp.142-53).

The Dog Exercising Machine (1970) and *Children Solve Problems* (1972) are two rather iconic, playful and original publications which reveal Edward de Bono's interest in education in the early days and his conviction that children do not censor their ideas. The 1970 publication presents 72 drawings submitted by children who were asked to design a dog exercising machine. The 1972 publication provides an insight into children's thought processes as it exhibits children's ideas related to nine assigned tasks, including how to weigh an elephant, how to design a sleep machine and how to help the police to deal

with criminals. These two publications reveal the manner in which young children tend to be totally uninhibited when coming up with ideas, something which tends to diminish over time as they move through the educational system and become more cautious where censorship and right and wrong are concerned.

Management

The numerous publications which Edward de Bono authored in the management field include two very original publications, *Sur/Petition: Going beyond competition* (1992) and *Simplicity* (1998). *Sur/Petition* deals with 'Competition' which is 'one of the things that is necessary for business to survive, but it is not sufficient. ... Competition is merely part of the baseline for survival. Success requires going beyond competition to sur/petition' (pp. viii-ix). The latter term is defined as follows: 'Instead of running in the same race, you create your own race' (p. xi). Its originality lies in the fact that methods are provided for organisations to generate value in such a manner so as to 'create their own race' and move beyond the competition, rather than merely reacting to the competition. Sur/petition allows organisations to stand out and be instantly distinguished from their competitors.

Simplicity (1998) is Edward de Bono's reaction to increased complexity, both with regards to devices (video recorders, which are rarely used today, are mentioned on the dust jacket of the hardbound version) and legislation. The book contains valuable suggestions, tactics and rules for simplicity. It first directs the reader to Page 279 where ten rules of simplicity are listed. Edward de Bono advocated the setting up of 'The Edward de Bono National Simplicity Campaign (and local campaigns)' (pp. 289-305), and an annual 'Simplicity Day' in the Appendix.

Thinking is a skill for the future

One thread that runs throughout Edward de Bono's publications is the strong recommendation: Everyone ought to make time for thinking. In his view, thinking is a skill that we can learn, practice and excel at. The human brain is not designed to be creative, neither is creativity some extraordinary attribute that one is either born with or not. Edward claimed that: 'If you think creativity is a mysterious gift, you can only sit and wait for ideas. But if creativity is a skill, you ought to learn it'.

As an educator, I find that Edward de Bono's work raises the following question: What should educators teach their students so that they are well equipped to survive in a dynamic and uncertain future? Traditionally, education has been geared at teaching specific subjects to students to prepare them for particular careers or professions. However, due to the exponential rate of change which we constantly experience, it is difficult to predict which professions or jobs will still be around in the future, and whether the profession of one's choice will remain a valid option and, if so, for how long.

As Talwar et al. (2016) state, "for those aged under eleven, the bulk of the jobs they'll do probably don't exist yet" (p.8). Quite a few jobs and professions have become obsolete over the years. Many more will. One only needs to think of the reduction in the number of print copy newspapers sold daily, the use of fixed telephone land lines or the amount of snail mail sent through the post.

Edward often criticised academia and the educational system. Sir Ken Robinson (who was one of the ambassadors, together with Edward de Bono, for the European Commission's European Year of Creativity and Innovation in 2009) also criticised the educational system, claiming that schools kill creativity. Sir Ken (2006) drew attention to future uncertainty as he said: 'If you think of it, children starting school this year will be retiring in 2065. Nobody has a clue ... what the world will look like in five years' time. And yet we're meant to be educating them for it' (n.p.p.).

This uncertainty and the exponential rate of change point towards the importance of including and sustaining thinking skills in educational curricula. I strongly believe that creativity is a key skill for the future. Creativity is a skill that everyone has the possibility to acquire and improve. The application of Edward de Bono's methods allows for the creation of value, it enables individuals to stand out from the crowd and to achieve success in today's competitive and fast-changing world.

Edward de Bono generously shared his ideas with countless people all over the world, including in Malta where he delivered regular workshops and seminars at the University of Malta. His underlying aim was to encourage the application of a value-added perception of the world which would create more critical and creative thinkers and which would make the world a much better place to live in.

In conclusion, it is up to each reader to decide whether this tribute does justice to a great mind. For this reason, I would like to conclude with a remark from Paddy Hills, who was Edward de Bono's 'behind the scenes' personal assistant in London from the mid-1970s, and who is quoted as having shared this observation concerning Edward's biography: 'I think that what you are going to find through your research is a great sense of warmth from various people and energy, but they are not going to be able to hold the butterfly for you or pin things down. When you try to get a neat order around him you won't be able to' (cited in Dudgeon, 2001, p.172).

The Edward de Bono Institute for Creative Thinking and Innovation, which I set up at the University of Malta in 1992, is part of Edward de Bono's exceptional legacy. I am proud to form part of this legacy, and grateful for his intellectual contributions. He has been a constant source of inspiration and an excellent mentor, and I am privileged to have known this exceptional and unique person.

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