

Science Explains Creativity

With so much emphasis on creativity and innovation, it helps if we can all cut directly to the chase – namely what’s behind creativity? Thanks to various scientific studies and author Jonah Lehrer, we have great insights into where creativity comes from. In his book, Imagine: How Creativity Works, Lehrer highlights some very important research that explains creativity.

For starters, creativity is not one train of thought. It is about how people can switch their thinking from one mode to another. For example, we all get stuck on some problem, struggling to break through and reach a solution. What creative people do is they switch gears from say analytical thinking to day dreaming and imagination. Knowing when and how to make these switches is critical to creative problem solving.

Lehrer also points out how awful our institutions are at killing off creativity. Surveys show that when asked are you creative, 95% of kids in second grade say yes – they love to paint, play and have fun with life. By the fifth grade, 50% of kids say they are creative and by the time they reach high school, it drops below 10%. Schools, just like corporations and so many institutions, are highly structured, telling us to stay focused, pay attention, sit at your desk, don’t take breaks, and so forth. And as Lehrer points out, creativity is our most important talent; it defines our world and yet our institutions do so much to destroy it.

In order to be creative, you must have “moments of insight” which Lehrer argues requires some **wasted** time. Let people day dream, let them have some fun, and give them a chance to interact and socialize together. Steve Jobs understood this concept very well, forcing people to pass through the hall ways on their way to only one bathroom located in the center of the building. As Jobs once said “We are trying to climb a mountain with a team of people.” The science shows that people engaged in open debate are 25% more likely to generate workable ideas than those who take a structured approach such as brainstorming sessions (too many non-workable ideas).

Diversity with social networks is also important. A study of social networks and entrepreneurs found that the types of social networks you choose can impact your ability to innovate. Entrepreneurs who had extremely diverse social networks were 3 times more innovative than those who had very predictive and narrowly defined social networks. It is important to get way outside your comfort zone since creativity is very much about piecing together very distant parts.

Some of what the research shows is amazingly simple. For example, the act of taking a break or “sleeping on it” is incredibly powerful. Studies show that people who take frequent breaks are much more creative than those taking minimal breaks. Another amazing simple fact is how relaxation makes people more creative. As Lehrer points out, a study of undergraduates showed that when intoxicated, undergraduates scored 30% higher than those who were sober

on creativity tests. Working under stress, trying to stay focused and taking in caffeine are the worst things you can do to be creative. Ironically, the science shows that people who allow themselves to be distracted are 7 times better at creative achievements than those who force themselves to avoid distractions.

A final point concerns self-control. Most of us are held back on our creative capabilities because we rely too much on the self-control part of the brain which says No – don't take the risk. A study from John Hopkins looked at jazz pianist and found that jazz musicians de-activate the self-control part of the brain and when this happens, extremely high levels of creativity pour out. This approach to creativity requires hard work, but this is where the biggest pay-off resides.

The evidence is clear when it comes to creativity. It requires different ways of thinking at different times. It requires interaction with people well outside your normal environment and some of this stuff is not hard to do – take a vacation, go waste some time, have a beer, or take a walk. As one researcher concluded, the best predictor of success is a willing persistence to breakthrough, but doing it in a free flowing way. It's about choosing easy and working hard. If you are free flowing with your choices in life, but willing to work very hard at them, you will be creative just like the jazz musician.

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