

# TOP TEN MYTHS ABOUT CREATIVITY

By [artsHub](#) | Monday August 19 2013

**Solitary geniuses and mad creatives make good fiction but research shows the truth about creativity is more prosaic.**

Some people wrap their identity in an idea that creativity justifies (or demands) their excesses. Others we write creativity off as a gift they have never and could never own.

But new insights from a growing body of research into creativity shows much of the language of inspiration, altered states and in-born talents is not borne out in the reality of the successful working artist.

Chloe Killen, who is in the final stages of a PhD investigating creativity in the production of Australian children's picture books, says creativity is widely misunderstood. 'Whatever most people think creativity is, they're almost definitely wrong.'

That's because creativity is not one great gift or singular way of thinking. 'Creativity is the product of a number of elements merging together at the right time. It's about understanding your particular area of interest, engaging with a dynamic field of people, and using your particular talents to shape something relevant and innovative,' says Killen.

So what are the myths and how do they stack up on the evidence?

## 1. Creativity belongs to the geniuses

**The myth:** Creativity is the preserve of a small number of people born with an almost superhuman capacity for great work.

**The reality:** Research suggests that creative ability has far more to do with hard work and commitment than any natural ability; even for those people we call geniuses.

In his 2006 book *Outliers: The Story of Success*, Malcolm Gladwell popularised the '10,000 hour rule' as the time a person needs to become expert at any skill.

Based on a study by psychologist [Anders Ericsson](#) this theory holds that greatness requires enormous time investment. He uses as an example The Beatles, who

performed live in [Hamburg, Germany](#) more than 1,200 times from 1960 to 1964, amassing more than 10,000 hours of playing time. Gladwell asserts that all of the time The Beatles spent performing shaped their talent and quotes Beatles' biographer [Philip Norman](#) as saying, 'So by the time they returned to England they sounded like no one else. It was the making of them.'

Certainly there are children with exceptional talents but even Mozart, one of the most famous examples of a child genius, received rigorous musical training from a very young age.

[Dr Phillip McIntyre](#), a creativity expert at the University of Newcastle, says, 'Cognitive psychologist Margaret Boden's work is the best way to think about this. She argues there are two forms of creativity but both are absolutely related to each other.

'The first she calls Personal or Psychological creativity. The second she calls Historical creativity, that is, the things history selects as creative. This is the one we think belongs to geni. However, and this is the important part, there can't be any H creativity without it first being P creative. Therefore creativity must belong to everybody not just the geniuses.'

## **2. Creativity is making something from nothing**

**The myth:** To be creative, a work must be wholly original.

**The reality:** Creative people are synthesisers as much as they are originators. They bring ideas together in new ways to create something new out of existing ideas. Acknowledging influences and responding to them is not weakness, it is self-awareness.

[Arthur Koestler](#) likened the emergence of ideas seemingly from nowhere to a chain underwater with only the two ends visible above - just because you can't see the links doesn't mean they're not there.

In European art the Impressionists were seen as originals, bringing a new way of seeing. But their work combined the influences of the Barbizon school of landscape painters, the flat surfaces of Asian ceramic art and the new knowledge of optical science. Impressionism was new but it was far from making something from nothing.

Aristotle observed that everything we do and the way we do it is influenced by our engagement with the world. 'Whatever comes to be is generated by the agency of

something, out of something, and comes to be something.'

### **3. Creativity can't be forced**

**The myth:** An artist needs to wait for inspiration to strike.

**The reality:** The Inspirationist view holds that creativity is divinely inspired and that creative people merely act as channels for external inspiration. This view does not give the artist much credit for creativity – but doesn't give the creative person any responsibility either.

Few people believe literally in muses but the idea still exists in the notion that we must wait for creative ideas to appear.

But inspiration is more likely to come to those who work hard. The inventor Thomas Edison famously noted that inspiration was a very small portion of creativity. Most of his inventions came down to hard work. 'None of my inventions came by accident. I see a worthwhile need to be met and I make trial after trial until it comes. What it boils down to is one per cent inspiration and ninety-nine per cent perspiration,' he told a press conference in 1929.

The more work you do, the more you know about your practice, and the more you engage with the work of others, the more likely you are to produce creative ideas.

Modern writer Jim Butcher put it simply, in his recipe for becoming a writer:

- 1) Make up your mind that you are going to protect your own dream. If you've got it back, your dream is invincible.
- 2) Cultivate patience. Prepare for the long haul. Building your skills to a professional level can take years. So can building your professional character.
- 3) Put your Butt In the Chair and start writing. Period. No excuses. There is no substitute for BIC time. It's part of the price you pay.
- 4) When you get done with a word, write another word.
- 5) Repeat steps 4 and 5 until your dream comes true.

### **4. Mental illness causes creativity**

**The myth:** Allowing yourself to sink into the depths of depression or being transported by florid psychosis is a necessary price for creative brilliance.

**The reality:** Science has found a link between mental illness and creativity in some creative industries. [Studies of artists and writers](#) confirm that artists and writers are up to 20 times more likely to suffer from bipolar disorder (also called manic depressive illness) and 10 times more likely to suffer from depression.

But that does not mean that creativity causes mental illness nor that you need to allow a mental health problem to flourish in order to be the most creative.

Professor Kay Redfield Jamison is an international authority on mental health and creativity, both as a psychiatrist and as a person with bipolar. Jamison says many artists with mental health problems resist medication because they believe it will damage their creativity.

But Jamison, who is herself on lithium for bipolar, [says](#) recent studies of artists and writers diagnosed with bipolar and taking medication found three quarters were as productive or more productive on medication.

She says the destructive effect of depression on the brain, the progressive nature of bipolar and the very real risk of suicide argues against refusing treatment. 'Clearly no one is creative when severely depressive, psychotic or in four-point restraints...Artists and writers tend to focus on the risks of treatment and not on the risks of no treatment.'

## 5. Drugs make you more creative

**The myth:** Drugs alter your mind in a way that generate special insights or thought processes that enhance creative ability.

**The reality:** While this myth and the previous one both stem from the belief that creativity comes from extraordinary thought processes or an altered stated of mind, current research suggests that creativity has more to do with a number of ordinary thought processes and a combination of divergent (or lateral) thinking and convergent thinking.

In his 2012 book *Explaining Creativity*, psychologist [Dr Keith Sawyer](#) says, 'creative achievement requires a complex combination of DT [divergent thinking], convergent thinking, critical evaluation, and other abilities, and creative people are good at switching back and forth at different points in the creative process.'

Yet in line with the myth, many creative people through history have cultivated

eccentric personas or stories to accompany their work.

Sawyer says creators and even historians “often embellish the story to make it fit better into our cultural myth of creativity”.

He gives the example S.T. Coleridge who claimed his poem *Kubla Khan* came to him in its entirety while on an opium high. Yet the discovery of earlier drafts of the work indicate this wasn't the case.

‘In many cases they [drugs] attempt to replicate the feelings that accompany creativity. Bliss is one of them,’ McIntyre says. ‘But we're confusing the cart with the horse here. The feelings come from being creative.’

In any case, it is not enough to point to a spot in the brain and say ‘creativity lives there’. The roles of social and cultural forces are just as important and all must be considered in combination when seeking to explain creativity.

## **6. To be creative you need to be free**

**The myth:** Limitations and boundaries stifle creative expression.

**The reality:** Rather than hindering the process, structures actually enable creativity to occur.

Sociologist Janet Wolff said, 'Everything we do is located in, and therefore affected by, social structures. It does not follow from this that in order to be free agents we somehow have to liberate ourselves from social structures and act outside them.

‘On the contrary, the existence of these structures and institutions enables any activity on our part, and this applies equally to acts of conformity and acts of rebellion.’

All creative activity is guided by and occurs within certain boundaries, whether that is canvas size, the guidelines of a brief, a budget or a deadline.

‘Freedom is not the absence of constraint,’ McIntyre says. ‘That's naive thinking. It's better to say freedom is about having choice.’

It is the knowledge of the limits of a project as well as the conventions of your practice that allow you to participate in creative activity, and the choices made

within these constraints that give a work its eventual shape.

For example, if you only know English, you are restricted to writing in English, but it is the use of the conventions of that language, the meaning of words and the way the sentences are put together that allows you to craft a story and for that story to be understood.

## **7. Creativity belongs to the arts**

**The myth:** The arts are creative professions while other domains such as maths and science are not.

**The reality:** Although the two words are often used interchangeably, 'artistic' and 'creative' are not the same thing. Arenas like maths, science and engineering that aren't traditionally associated with creativity have just as much claim to the word as those that are.

Creativity expert McIntyre says, 'There's far too much evidence to say that science is just as creative. Creativity is bringing novel things into being that are valued in at least one social setting. Do artists and scientists both do that? Of course they do.'

The same process is involved whether you are making changes to a recipe for your family, designing a building, or developing a mathematical theory.

Even the tasks we take for granted as mundane can be creative acts.

Sydney-based theatre maker and producer Brendan O'Connell gives the example of making a rehearsal schedule.

'You might not think it's creative but you have to use your creative understanding of directing and rehearsing and apply it to a very mundane technical task of a schedule so you can say, "okay, well with my creative knowledge of what it's going to take to make this play...it's actually going to take x amount of hours of rehearsal time,"' O'Connell says.

'Anything like that is just as important as the creative work you do in the rehearsal room.'

## **8. Creativity is a solitary activity**

**The myth:** To be truly creative you must do every bit of work yourself.

**The reality:** Some art forms have completely exploded this myth just by the nature of the skills involved. Film is generally recognised as a collaborative activity while visual art and writing are not.

But all creativity activity involves and relies on other people, whether that is in the manufacture of materials, those who provide advice, the foundations built by those who came before you, or those responsible for recognising products and ideas as creative.

‘Most often each person interacts with lots of other people who know about the things we're bringing into being and we learn from them and take advice from them, in which case they contribute to our output,’ McIntyre says.

Recognising the contribution of others to your creative process does not make you any less creative.

In his autobiography Anthony Trollope even suggested the servant he employed to wake him up with a cup of coffee every morning might deserve as much credit for the writing as he did.

## **9. Extrinsic motivation is detrimental to creativity**

**The myth:** The only driver that matters for artists is the desire to create.

**The reality:** Romantic ideas of authenticity and art for arts sake have traditionally privileged intrinsic motivation over any other form of reward for artists – particularly financial.

But creative people like praise, status and money as much as anyone else and many are fast tiring of the myth of intrinsic motivation being used as an excuse for undervaluing what they do financially.

While the drive to create and the intrinsic pleasure of the process are obviously important, on a day-to-day levels deadlines, commissions and the demands of a curator or producer on the end of the phone are also powerful motivators.

Of course devoting the necessary time and attention to the creative process is far easier if you enjoy what you are doing, sometimes a looming deadline, payment, or

an encouraging word can be just what you need to get the job done.

'I've seen a lot of people who don't work with deadlines,' O'Connell says. 'And I think – how can you ever get anything done?'

## **10. To explain creativity is to damage it**

**The myth:** Creativity is often viewed as a phenomenon that not only cannot but should not be explained. Something that if pulled apart can never be pieced back together.

**The reality:** If we understand how creativity works, that it is the product of cultural and social forces, and that it doesn't belong to lone geniuses but to individuals who actively participate in the process, then we can replicate that process.

Neurology, psychology, sociology and education are now contributing to a growing body of research about creative processes and one thing all the disciplines agree on is that understanding the creative process helps people be more creative.

'By reflecting upon the process we can better hone our craft,' says Killen.

artsHub | [editor@artshub.com.au](mailto:editor@artshub.com.au)