

Expert: You too can be creative; it just takes hard work

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Creativity is not some magical trait, says creativity expert R. Keith Sawyer, Ph.D. "You have to work hard to be a more creative person. You have to be diligent."

Do you desire to be a more creative person but don't think you have the "creative" gene? You may have some hard work ahead, but it's possible to become the next Walt Disney or Martha Stewart, says an expert on creativity at Washington University in St. Louis.

"No one is born highly creative," says R. Keith Sawyer, Ph.D., associate professor of education and of psychology, both in Arts & Sciences.

"Psychologists studying creativity have discovered that it is based on cognitive processes we all share. Creativity is not the result of some magic brain region that some people have and others don't."

Oxford Press has just released Sawyer's latest book, "Explaining Creativity: The Science of Human Innovation," a seminal overview of the history of creativity and of research into traits that highly creative people all share.

Designed as a textbook for his Washington University course Psychology of Creativity, "Explaining Creativity" is a general overview of the science of creativity for anyone who wants to know more about it. In the book, Sawyer outlines some of the myths that many of us hold about creative people.

Dispelling the myths

"When people say they aren't creative, it's because of some false ideas about creativity that we hold as a society," Sawyer says. "One myth is that if you're a creative person it's a trait and everything you touch turns to gold. That's not the way creativity works. It's not some magical trait. You have to work hard to be a more creative person. You have to be diligent," he says.

It's also a myth that creative people "have pierced body parts and tattoos and they sleep at odd hours and maybe they are not socially smooth or skilled — maybe they are loners."

Actually, when researchers study creative people, Sawyer says, they find that most of them are normal, happy and healthy. Most aren't depressed or alcoholics or schizophrenic.

"Another myth about creativity that many people in our society believe is that there is a link between mental illness and creativity," Sawyer says.

"Hollywood loves this myth. Oftentimes, the role of a highly creative person in a movie is portrayed by a character who is also mentally ill. There certainly are examples of creative people who do have mental illness, like the author Sylvia Plath. But she even said she was a better writer when she wasn't depressed. She wanted to get rid of her mental illness and didn't think it helped her be more creative."

Sawyer says that many people have a vision of highly creative people as "lone geniuses." "In reality," says Sawyer, "creative people network with other people. A lot of creativity happens through collaboration. Much of my own research focuses on the relationship between collaboration and creativity.

"In today's technological society, many of the more important or popular creative products are made by large organizations," he adds. "For example, PlayStation® video games are created by a team of more than 100 people."

Sawyer insists that to be creative, one has to have organizational structure and collaboration.

"If you are a loner in a room somewhere doing your own thing, you aren't going to be employed very long," Sawyer says. "Video games are just one example. Think of any major creative organization. Increasingly over the past 20 to 50 years, the important kinds of creativity and innovation have involved large groups of people."

Any Hollywood movie has a large staff, "as you always see in the credits," Sawyer says. "Of course, all the fame goes to the director, the actors, and sometimes the writer or the cinematographer; but unless

you're really into movies, you probably don't know that many movies have multiple directors and producers, and most scripts include contributions by as many as 10 different writers. And then there are almost a 100 other creative experts who contribute to the final product."

A computer software application like the Microsoft Windows® operating system is never created by a single individual, Sawyer adds. "There's a large staff, grouped into a complex organizational arrangement, and each programmer and designer makes an essential creative contribution."

Conventional thinking

But the myth of the lone genius still persists because many people, when they think of the stereotypical creative-type person, they think of the ultimate lone genius — the poet. "People see poets as being very solitary and yet very creative. Many people think all a poet needs is a pencil and some paper and he or she never has to talk to anyone. People tend to view painters the same way. They think all the artist needs is a canvas and paint and he or she doesn't require social interaction."

However, Sawyer says, research shows that even writers and painters are very social and creative and they spend a lot of time interacting with other people. "They have to get ideas from somewhere," he adds.

Another myth about creativity held by many is that creativity is the opposite of convention and constraint. "Many people think the best way to be creative is to break all the rules. Anytime you are constrained or limited, that will get in the way of creativity. That's just not true. In fact, creativity could not happen in the absence of convention."

An example of this is something as basic as musical creativity.

"All music, at least in the West, is based on 12 tones and has certain rhythmic patterns," Sawyer explains. "There are structures to songs and a finite number of instruments are available. Those are all conventions for creating music. You wouldn't say that a composer is not creative because he composed a tune in the 12-tone scale. We don't insist that every composer make up a whole new scale. We don't insist that every composer invent his own instruments.

"Music wouldn't exist without this complicated set of conventions that we often don't even think of as conventional. Musicians never get frustrated because they only have 12 notes in the scale. Writers don't get upset because they only have 26 letters to use."

Creativity in everyday life

Many people don't realize they're being creative by just carrying on a conversation.

"Everyday conversation is a great example of creativity that everyone does on a daily basis," Sawyer says. "I wrote a book in 2001 called "Creating Conversations" that focused on my study of a Chicago improvisational theatre group. I found that what improvisational groups do on stage mirrors what people do in good conversations.

"There's a lot of give and take and everyone is listening to everyone else," Sawyer explains. "You hear what your partner says and really absorb that and build on it. So a good conversation is truly collaborative and emerges from what everyone is doing together."

He thinks a lot of people are good conversationalists. "You don't have to be Van Gogh or Picasso or Einstein to use good creative conversation skills.

"We just don't think of conversation as being creative because a lot of people do it, we use it every day and it doesn't seem to require any special abilities. When we have a conversation, we don't feel like we're being creative, but we are. It's hard to realize because conversation happens so fast. The creativity is somewhat hidden."

Work hard and work smart

So what's the secret to becoming more creative?

"You can't be creative without knowing a lot about what you are trying to be creative in," Sawyer says. "You can't just decide to be creative in something. Really creative people spend a lot of time in preparation."

"For example, it takes a long time to become a good jazz musician. It's not something you do on your first try. If you try to sit in with a band before you're ready, you'll get booted off in a hurry. It's like that with nearly every creative domain."

If you want to be creative, Sawyer says, spend a lot of time learning about the subject and what others have done before. "Network and find out who else is working in the area. A lot of good creativity comes from collaboration. Creativity takes a lot of time and hard work."

Sawyer thinks much of the difference between highly creative people and the rest of us is hard work and work habits.

"Creative people work hard but they also work smart," Sawyer adds. "There is a certain way they structure their work habits. They structure their day so they alternate between hard work and time off. Researchers call it idle time."

A common pattern for creative people is to work hard in the morning

and then take some time away during lunch to take a walk or garden or ride a bike. A lot of creative people have their great ideas when they take time away from their work. Idle time allows them to think of their problems in new ways. People talk about the 'aha' moment emerging when you are doing something else."

Creative people also tend to have multiple related long-term projects going on at the same time. "When they are working on one thing and they get stuck, they shift to another project. That creates potential for unexpected connections between the projects."

Creative people also take breaks to do something radically different from their current project. "They might read a book, play a board game or take a walk. These are times where distant analogies can happen — meaning something on the board game might provide an idea regarding the current project. Something in a book might connect two ideas together. A walk might allow for viewing of new concepts."

When Sawyer talks to corporations about creativity, he always emphasizes the importance of making employees take all of their vacation time.

"Many people don't take their vacation and they end up rolling over all of their off time. If I were a senior manager, I would make everyone take all of their vacation time," Sawyer says. "Time away from work is essential for recharging the batteries, so to speak, and to help people think more creatively on the job. People need freedom in their schedule for idle time."

'Seeing the burr in the dog's fur'

Sawyer says that the brain processes we use for creativity are based on the same building blocks that we all use everyday, like brushing your

teeth or taking a shower or fixing breakfast.

"The story of the man who invented Velcro is a good example," Sawyer says. "He was taking a walk with his dog and the dog got a burr stuck in his fur. The guy examined a burr under a magnifying glass and noticed the little hooks. He had the idea that a string of similar tiny hooks could be used as a clothing fastener, replacing the zipper. There's more to it, but that's the basic idea.

"We all have ability to see the burr in the dog's fur," Sawyer explains, "but the more creative person is able to make the connections more easily. Creative people are able to gain insight by forming an analogy between two things that seem really dissimilar."

Source: Washington University in St. Louis

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