

Myth: The Lightbulb Moment, Innovation's Most Misleading Meme

February 28, 2023



Remember that “Eureka!” moment when Thomas Edison instantly and brilliantly invented the lightbulb—a prominent symbol of industry and innovation? Forget it! That simply never happened. So, how did the ubiquitous visual meme of the lightbulb moment begin? Let’s see.

By now, it’s commonplace to memorialize someone’s sudden and great idea with an illustration of a lighted bulb above their head. Thomas Edison is commonly credited with inventing the lightbulb; perhaps he claimed to have had an epiphany in its creation. However, this account isn’t true.

For starters, Edison didn’t invent the lightbulb, although he did discover how to decrease its cost of production and increase its operational longevity. More problematically, these innovative advances by no means arrived in lightning strokes of genius. It took hundreds of attempts before Edison found the specific bamboo filament that was to make his version of the lightbulb a marketable success.

So, no, Edison shouldn’t be admired for his creativity—but for his industry. He himself famously declared, “Genius is one per cent inspiration, ninety-nine per cent perspiration.” Indeed, taking direct

aim at the very essence of the lightbulb moment, Edison offered a bluntly unpretentious self-appraisal of his numerous celebrated innovations, including the lightbulb: “I never had an idea in my life. I’ve got no imagination. I never dream. My so-called inventions already existed in the environment—I took them out. I’ve created nothing. Nobody does. There’s no such thing as an idea being brain-born; everything comes from the outside. The industrious one coaxes it from the environment.”

If the meme of the lightbulb moment isn’t to be credited to Edison, then how might this wildly popular cliché have originated? Some authors have suggested that the expressive symbols and images that were often depicted above the head of silent cartoon favorite Felix the Cat may hold the key. Nevertheless, despite Felix’s evident knowhow with lightbulbs—in the 1927 episode, “The Cat and the Kit,” Felix used two to replace his car’s burned-out headlamp—a lustrous lightbulb above his head never appeared.

Actually, a different cartoon character—Professor Grampy—seems to have been the source of the lightbulb moment. In ten animated shorts produced from 1935 to 1937 by Max Fleischer Studios, the sly gadgeteer frequently came to the aid of “Jazz Baby” Betty Boop by jury-rigging shrewd solutions to thorny problems.

When confronted with such challenges, Grampy characteristically reached into his pocket, brought out and then donned his proverbial “thinking cap”—a mortarboard with an unlit bulb mounted on top. With plucky resolve, he then hunkered down to work, dutifully engaging the trial-and-error process of entertaining one possibility after another, all the while stroking his beard and muttering, “Let me think.” When he finally hit upon the solution, the bulb lit up and Grampy gleefully exclaimed, “Hooray, I’ve got it!”

Despite this vivid evidence, the full story behind the animation of Grampy’s lightbulb moments has yet to be told. We can surmise that they might have represented a meeting of two memes. First, the lighting of the bulb may represent a “bright idea” that “shines light” on a challenging problem, thereby “energizing” its practical solution. Second, the bulb didn’t float mysteriously overhead; rather, it was screwed into an iconic article of academic attire, the mortarboard. Placing this professorial cap on Grampy’s head clearly signaled that deep thinking—the very business of the brain—was on tap.



[Paramount Pictures](#), Public domain, via Wikimedia

Commons

But wait! Didn't Edison disavow brain-born ideas as responsible for his inventions? And didn't he emphasize perspiration over inspiration in the creative process?

Edison died in 1931. So, he could never have seen any of Grampy's animated lightbulb moments. His reaction to them can only be guessed.

I suspect that Edison would have taken a decidedly dim view of these cartoonish portrayals of innovation, although he would have been quite pleased with the audio and video quality of the films themselves. After all, Edison paved the way for motion pictures of this caliber with his own invention of the Kinetophone and the Kinetoscope.

Investigating the origin of the lightbulb moment is certainly challenging and entertaining, but could there be more to be learned from this inquiry? I believe so.

It's all too facile to believe that venerated inventors and creative artists are special—so special that true giftedness enables them to accomplish amazing feats with astonishing speed and ease. This possibly misleading portrayal of creativity leaves the rest of us to dejectedly and enviously sit on the sidelines instead of getting into the game.

[Related content: Busting Myths in Psychological Science](#)

How about putting aside the myth of the lightbulb moment and accepting the challenges that face us with the resilience and tenacity that Edison championed? Success may not come quickly or easily; but time and effort can often overcome whatever we may lack in raw talent. This more positive attitude may help unleash the innovative possibilities in all of us.

Lesson Plan

Please consider the following questions. They might prompt some very interesting and revealing answers.

- The lightbulb moment has proven to be an extremely trendy and widespread belief. How might you explain its popularity and ubiquity?
- Do you believe that great innovations are generally the result of lightbulb moments? Why or why not?
- Even if you were to accept that lightbulb moments routinely prompt great ideas, then what role might trial and error also play in the creative process?
- Leonard da Vinci, Galileo Galilei, Isaac Newton, William Shakespeare, Johann Sebastian Bach, Charles Darwin, Ludwig van Beethoven, Vincent van Gogh, Thomas Edison, Louis Pasteur, Marie Curie, Pablo Picasso, Albert Einstein—these and other great innovators and creative artists are held in exceptionally high esteem. What, if anything, do you believe may have been so

special about these people that accounts for their remarkable accomplishments?

- By the way, how might you explain the relative rarity of women among such lists of celebrated innovators and artists?
- Recall Edison's contention that "there's no such thing as an idea being brain-born; everything comes from the outside." What sense can you make of his rather puzzling claim?
- In 2022, Dell Technologies launched a new advertising campaign called "There's an Innovator in All of Us." This slogan proposes that when technology is more powerful, simpler to use, and easier to access, every person—and every business—can do more incredible things. Do you agree? Why or why not?
- In your experience, have you or someone you know developed a novel behavior, had a creative idea, or made a new product? How did it come about? Does its creation support or refute the notion of the lightbulb moment?

Feedback on this article? Email apsobserver@psychologicalscience.org or login to comment.

Interested in writing for us? Read our [contributor guidelines](#).