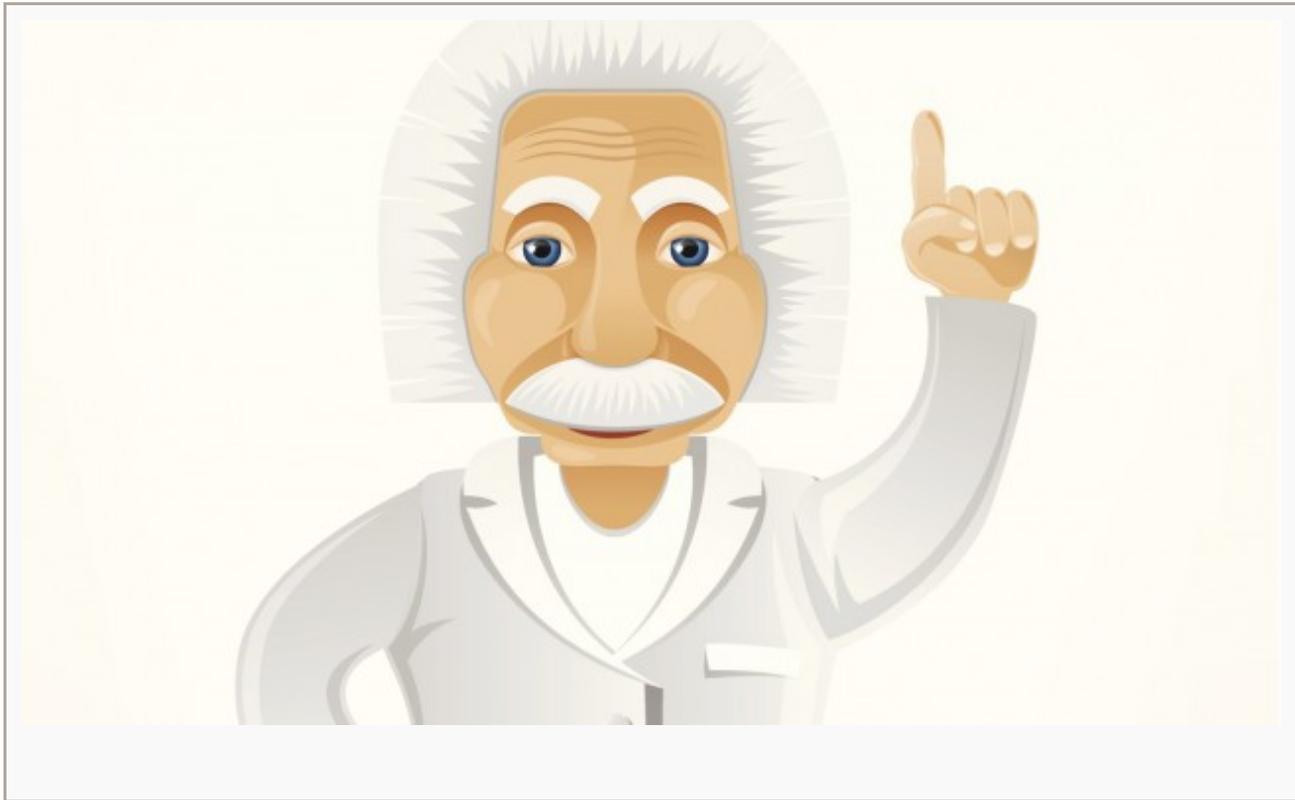


Debunking the Genius Myth

Holly Korbey



Picture a “genius” — you’ll probably conjure an image of an Einstein-like character, an older man in a ruffled suit, disorganized and distracted even as he, almost accidentally, stumbles upon his next “big idea.” In truth, the acclaimed scientist actually said, “It’s not that I’m so smart, it’s just that I stay with problems longer.” But the narrative around Einstein and a lot of accomplished geniuses — think Ben Franklin, the key and the bolt of lightning — tends to focus more on mind-blowing talent and less on the hard work behind the rise to success. A downside of the genius mythology results in many kids trudging through school believing that a great student is born, not made — lucky or unlucky, Einstein or Everyman.

Harvard-educated tutors Hunter Maats and Katie O’Brien began to notice that this belief about being born smart was creating a lot of frustration for the kids they tutored, and sometimes unwittingly reinforced by their parents. “We had sessions working with a student where the mom would walk by and say, ‘Oh, he didn’t get the math gene!’” said O’Brien. “And I’d think, Gee, give the kid a reason to never even try.”

“Try,” it seems, is the magical and operative word that has the possibility to transform how well a student does in school — once they understand a little about how to try, and a little about [how learning and the brain works](#). How students think about learning makes a difference in what they’re able to achieve. Groundbreaking research conducted by Stanford psychologist Carol Dweck has shown that when students take on a [growth mindset](#) — one in which they believe that the brain is malleable, and they can improve at a task with effort — they handle setbacks better and improve academically.

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Maats and O’Brien knew about all the research, and began sharing information about learning and the brain with their students. They turned their one-on-ones into a book, [The Straight-A Conspiracy](#), to show teenagers that they had

control, for a large part, over how they did in school, and that believing certain kids were born talented was a grand conspiracy to keep them down and stressed out (with tongue planted firmly in cheek). The authors use the latest research in psychology and neuroscience to try and convince teens, with lots of pop culture references and humor thrown in, that understanding how their brain learns can help them “totally rule the world.”

Maats explained that often students he tutored had watched another kid in class blow through an assignment and assumed they were just naturally good at it, that they didn't even have to try. But he began clarifying the real reason they worked so fast; the student knew the answer right away because “it had become automatic,” he said. “They looked effortless, but they only became effortless through hard work.” Unlike sports or music, where students can see others practicing, much of schoolwork practice happens at home, builds slowly over time, and goes unseen. “You don't see the work others are doing, so it looks like it never happened,” Maats said.

O'Brien said that “geniuses” also know how to focus their attention, and that's why they may appear calm. “That overwhelmed feeling is coming from attention being focused on too many things that are not automated at once,” she said. “You can't focus on two things you don't know – but neither could Einstein!” Explaining one of the largest conspiracies they face with students, and parents' biggest complaint, student [multitasking](#), they disseminate the research for the teenage brain:

“Your attention can only deal with one unautomated task at a time. The idea that your attention can multitask is a major myth... When you're trying to do all four of these tasks – walking, chewing gum, talking to your friend and reading Huckleberry Finn – the first two won't be affected, because you've automated them. You can keep walking and chewing gum without even noticing they're happening. But each of the new activities – holding a new conversation and reading a new book – requires your full attention in order to go well... But the more important point is that you just don't want to put yourself through that! It's totally manic!... The more stuff you pile on at once, the more time pressure you add to the situation, the more you start to feel really overwhelmed.”

By using concrete research in a way that speaks directly to teenagers, Maats and O'Brien hope to dispel the image of the ruffled genius, being brilliant in spite of himself. Instead, they want students to know that there are proven techniques that can improve their school performance and get parents and teachers off their back (a particular favorite is “Go Cyborg on Your Mistakes,” an extended “Terminator” metaphor that relates the idea of [focused practice](#)). And they seem to relish explaining that the straight-A student is [working harder than kids think](#).

“You would never put a child into the driver's seat of a car, with no license and no drivers' ed, and expect him to be able to cruise down the highway successfully, with no fear or hesitation,” said O'Brien. “And yet kids are sent to school with no manual on how to use their brains. Not what to learn but how to learn. The result is that everyone spends their days in school guessing what might be the best approach, the most effective technique...and the questioning about the how takes a lot of time and attention away from what needs to be learned.”