



OPEN ACCESS



Check for updates

IMITATION IS THE BEST FORM OF FLATTERY—IT'S ALSO THE BEST FORM OF LEARNING

Muhammad Mustehsan Bashir¹✉

¹ Department of Plastic Surgery, King Edward Medical University, Lahore-Pakistan.

Address for correspondence:
Muhammad Mustehsan Bashir
Department of Plastic Surgery, King Edward Medical University, Lahore-Pakistan.

E-mail:
mmbashir1@gmail.com

There is an adage that “Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery,” often used to rationalize copying as a sign of admiration. But beyond fawning, imitation is also one of the most essential ways humans learn. From nonage to maturity, we assimilate knowledge, behaviors, and skills by observing and mimicking those around us.^{1,2} Some of the greatest breakthroughs in history have been envisioned by imitation, proving that it is not merely an act of copying but a bridgehead to creativity.

Psychologists and neuroscientists have long acknowledged imitation as a robust cognitive tool.² Mirror neurons, a type of brain cell that fires when we perform an action and when we observe someone else doing the same action, help us reproduce actions by observing others.^{3,4} This enables us to learn parlance, interpersonal relationships, and even complex abilities such as playing an instrument or mastering a sport.⁵ Children, for example, learn to speak by imitating sounds and words spoken by their parents.^{6,7} They develop social skills by copying those around them' expressions, gestures, and behaviors. Without imitation, much of early learning would be impossible.

While creativity is often celebrated as an act of pure originality, many great artists, writers, and inventors have built upon the work of others. The Renaissance artists, including Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo, first learned by copying the works of their predecessors before developing their unique styles. Similarly, Shakespeare borrowed plots from older stories but transformed them into masterpieces that stood the test of time. This journey from imitation to innovation should inspire us all to continue our learning and strive for our own unique contributions.

To the layman, cutting edge science might give the illusion that it has been born from scratch. However, in reality this is rarely the case. Every new technology and innovation is based on the previous technologies.

Synthesis of new knowledge is based on the knowledge of past scientists. It is, in fact, the imitation of the last work of giants in any field, combined with the creativity of the new generation of scientists that leads to the progress in any field. The previous work gives the crucial knowledge to build upon while the new generation brings in a fresh perspective and a new way to look at the old problems. This has been the foundation of scientific growth for centuries, a testament to the enduring power of imitation in our quest for knowledge and progress.

While imitation can be a strong foundation for learning the existing skills, the true goal is mastery of the existing knowledge and innovation of new processes. The best learners do not merely copy but adapt, improve, and personalize their learning.⁸ Martial arts students, for example, begin by mimicking their instructors but eventually develop their fighting styles. Writers start by emulating the structure of their favorite authors before finding their own voice.

One should be cognizant of the fine line between imitation and plagiarism. Ethical learning requires acknowledging the work of other people while striving for originality. When appropriately used, imitation should serve as inspiration rather than a shortcut to success. By embracing imitation as a learning strategy, while pushing ourselves to refine and innovate, we can create something truly unique and impactful. This ethical use of imitation not only respects the work of others but also fosters a culture of responsible learning and innovation.

REFERENCES

1. Fontanari JF. Imitative learning as a connector of collective brains. *PLoS One*. 2014 Oct 16;9(10):e110517. doi: 10.1371/journal.pone.0110517. PMID: 25329400; PMCID: PMC4199724.
2. Brass M, Heyes C. Imitation: is cognitive neuro-

This article may be cited as

Bashir M M. Imitation is the Best Form of Flattery—It's Also the Best Form of Learning. *J Postgrad Med Inst*. 2024; 38(2):95-6. <https://doi.org/10.54079/jpmi.38.2.3734>

- science solving the correspondence problem? *Trends Cogn Sci*. 2005 Oct;9(10):489-95. doi: 10.1016/j.tics.2005.08.007. PMID: 16126449.
3. 1. Cook R, Bird G, Catmur C, Press C, Heyes C. Mirror neurons: From origin to function. *Behav Brain Sci* 2014;37(2):177-92. DOI: 10.1017/S0140525X13000903.
4. 2. Bonini L, Rotunno C, Arcuri E, Gallese V. Mirror neurons 30 years later: Implications and applications. *Trends Cogn Sci* 2022;26(9):767-81. DOI: 10.1016/j.tics.2022.06.003.
5. 1. Legare CH, Nielsen M. Imitation and innovation: The dual engines of cultural learning. *Trends Cogn Sci* 2015;19(11):688-99. DOI: 10.1016/j.tics.2015.08.005.
6. 2. Cacchione T, Amici F. Insights from comparative research on social and cultural learning. *Prog Brain Res* 2020;254:247-70. DOI: 10.1016/bs.pbr.2020.05.008.
7. 3. Varallyay A, Beller N, Subiaul F. Generative cultural learning in children and adults: The role of compositionality and generativity in cultural evolution. *Proc Biol Sci* 2023;290(1997):20222418. DOI: 10.1098/rspb.2022.2418.
8. Corduff N. Imitation Is Not Just the Sincerest Form of Flattery-It Is the Sincerest Form of Learning: Reflecting on Rotation Mastopexy. *Aesthet Surg J*. 2024 Jun 14;44(7):NP521-NP522. doi: 10.1093/asj/sjae063. PMID: 38517285; PMCID: PMC11177548.