Improving the Creative Process to Achieve Innovation
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In the 1950's, William Spaulding was inspired to help young children learn to read. The challenge was laid out to him in a *Life Magazine* article illustrating how young readers were not as interested in reading the books available to them. As director of the education division for Houghton Mifflin, he took up the cause to bring to fruition a book containing words young children could recognize while captivating their attention.

To help him realize the mission, he enlisted the creative genius Theodor Geisel, more famously known as Dr. Seuss. The challenge was, as laid out in Philip Nel's *The Annotated Cat*: Write a book that young children can't put down.[1] This challenge was quickly accepted and Dr. Seuss went to work on developing a children's book that was exciting, engaging, and readable by second graders.

While the initial book concept seemed simple, it became much harder to execute than Dr. Seuss originally anticipated. His usual creative method of rhyming "….Jungle of Nool" with "…cool of the pool"[2] was hampered by the fact that all of the words had to derive from a vocabulary list for six and seven year-olds.

On the verge giving up, Dr. Seuss decided to review the word list one more time. If he found two words that rhymed, they would form the basis of the book. The first two words he came across were "cat" and "hat". These words sparked the memorable cat in the hat that created chaos in Sally and her brother's home one rainy afternoon all while using words second graders could read.

The Cat in the Hat became the defining moment of Dr. Seuss' career. It showcased his amazing ability to create these fantastic characters and worlds loved by children, even among rigid constraints. It was an immediate hit and elevated Dr. Seuss into a revered children's book author and household name.

As architects, we are creative individuals. We have been trained to approach problems with creativity and innovation. Similar to the word list challenge faced by Dr. Seuss, in our profession, we often face rigorous standards that limit possible solutions. Fixed budgets, site constraints, demanding security

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[1] Philip Nel, *The Annotated Cat.* (New York: Random House Books for Young Readers, 2007).
<http://www.npr.org/2007/03/01/7651308/fifty-years-of-the-cat-in-the-hat> (March 01, 2007).
[2] Dr. Seuss, *Horton Hears a Who*. (New York: Random House, 1954).

requirements and misaligned priorities all act as challenges to the design options we propose. This is when our creativity and ingenuity is required the most in order to deliver innovative solutions.

Yet, how often do we as design professionals really examine our own creative process? Managing time and energy is crucial to maximizing our creative output. As Todd Henry states in his introduction to *The Accidental Creative*, "You need to create space for your creative process to thrive rather than expect it to operate in the cracks of your frenetic schedule."[3] Obviously, inspiration cannot be scheduled; however, it is possible to improve the creative process to keep you inspired. Three important components to assist the creative process are defining the problem, understanding your strengths and unnecessarily creating. All three help elucidate the task, determine the approach, and add context for any design challenge.

Define the Problem.

Charles Kettering said "A problem well-stated is a problem half-solved." All too often a project goal appears nebulous or too general making it difficult to maintain focus. Imagine working on a puzzle without the finished image or any edge pieces? It becomes too difficult to know where to begin and too cumbersome to keep momentum. Clarity is required for efficient workflow.

To clearly define the problem, spend significant time with the clients, users and key stakeholders early on in the process to understand the root of the issues they're experiencing. With a clearly defined problem, a roadmap to a proper solution is easier to develop and achieve. If this detailed process is completed during the project kick-off, the design team will sustain productivity throughout the entire course of the project.

An accurate project definition also informs the objectives, the work product, and most importantly, the conclusion. It's much easier to know when a milestone is reached if it's clearly laid out from the beginning. This advice may sound obvious but when faced with a shortened project schedule or limited

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[3] Todd Henry. *The Accidental Creative.* (New York: Portfolio/Penguin, 2011.)

fee, the importance of this initial step is often minimized or removed from the scope, to the ultimate detriment of a project.

Understand Your Strengths.

The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator,[4] first published in 1962, assesses the psychological underpinnings to perceptions and decisions based on four main categories: sensation, intuition, feeling, and thinking. Understanding if you are an ESTJ (Extraversion / Sensing / Thinking / Judging) or INFP (Introversion / Intuition / Feeling / Perception) helps determine effectiveness and identifies preferences. Another great tool to decode personalities is Marcus Buckingham's *Now, Discover Your Strengths*. Instead of improving a weakness to become a strength, he emphasizes understanding your strengths and working with others to fill in for weaknesses. It's not critical that you overcome or eliminate your weakness. It's more important to strengthen your inherent abilities and rely on other team members whose exhibited strengths balance out your deficiencies.

Just as important as understanding your personality traits and strengths, it's also important to recognize how you and your fellow team members approach and utilize the creative process and projects. Todd Henry in his book, *Die Empty: Unleash Your Best Work Every Day*, outlines three kinds of work. *Mapping* refers to the planning process establishing the project. This includes defining the objectives, milestones and priorities. *Making* is actually doing the work or executing the project. Finally, *meshing* involves the work in between the work. These include activities that develop your skill and hone your craft. Attending conferences and reading articles are several ways to engage in meshing activities. There is no immediate pay-off but it's crucial for continuous personal development and growth within your firm and industry.

At some point, we engage in all three aspects, although, most have a greater disposition towards one of these particular activities. Unlike recognizing and enhancing your personality strengths, when approaching work it's important to develop in all three areas to sustain an efficient creative process. In order to be an effective mapper, you need to immerse yourself into the actual production of work. Meshing improves both planning and making. To refine your creative approach, engage with a mentor

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[4] Wikipedia contributors, "Myers-Briggs Type Indicator," *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Myers-Briggs_Type_Indicator (accessed December 1, 2014).

or someone you respect. As a Principal or Manager, consider the strengths and the approach each team member contributes in order to ensure the project's success.

Unnecessarily Create.

It may sound counter-intuitive but finding a point in your day, week, or month to work on something not related to your specific work task is important to reset the balance, provide context and discover potential connections. I recognize it seems impossible to balance work and life let alone finding time to create something with an unspecified end. However, we all operate under similar time constraints. Setting aside time for yourself to engage in creative activity purely for the act itself, reengages your passion and clarifies your thoughts.

This could be as simple as taking a walk, working out at the gym, going to a museum or reading a book. Julia Cameron introduced Morning Pages, 30 minutes of daily writing, in her book *The Artist's Way* as a way of moving through creative blocks. The writing exercise is viewed as a purging of thoughts first thing in the morning to aid creative production throughout the day. Matthew Crawford, author of *Shop Class as Soulcraft*, stresses the importance of physically working with our hands, particularly in today's hyper-digital world. All of the unnecessary creating examples serve as a meaningful diversion leading to renewed energy, focus and purpose that ultimately benefits a project.

Conclusion

Whether developing a housing unit plan, solving a challenging detail, or determining a set of priorities to phase over the next ten years, every project has its own unique set of constraints. For justice facilities, innovation is not achieved by replicating previous designs regardless of site context, operational considerations and detailed programmatic need. To truly tackle the large issues facing our industry such as the rising mentally ill inmate population, an increase in alternative solutions to incarceration, or renovating outmoded courthouses, ingenuity is required. By harnessing the creative process and expertly honing your specific creative approach, challenges transform into innovative solutions. Perhaps, it becomes a solution as career defining as Dr. Seuss' *The Cat in the Hat*.

Resources:

Buckingham, Marcus. *Now, Discover Your Strengths*. New York: The Free Press, 2001.

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