

Are procrastination and daydreaming helpful for the creative process?

by Lisa-Marie Maier

Creative blockades, the feeling of having tried everything and simply not finding a solution. After that, something else happens, we stop doing it. We procrastinate. In this essay, I will try to answer if this damages our creativity, which evolves through a process. This process and its theories (e.g. Wallas theory of the creative process) are discussed and analyzed in many texts. First of all, it's important to know what creativity and the creative process are about, how each stage of that process works and how creativity can be influenced. Things like fear, doubt, control (or loss of it), boredom and daydreaming are all part of it. All of these are connected by procrastination. But procrastination is may not as bad as we think. This essay is not about delaying everything unnecessarily, but rather about what it means to trust your creativity.

What exactly is creativity?

Let's start with a bit of theory. The following definition of creativity can be found in the Dictionary: „The use of imagination or original ideas to create something, inventiveness.“ (English Oxford Living Dictionaries, 2018)

The use of mental processes creates creativity that enables us to make something, which is new or original and useful at the same time. Besides, creativity is something that sets us apart from other beings. Even though artificial intelligence, creativity can only be imitated. There is no other species or another system that is nearly as creative as human beings. (Halford & Wilson, 2002) But not everyone is equally creative or in the same way. (Fisher & Williams, 2004) Contrary to many beliefs, creativity is not just important to artists or designers, because it is useful in any situation, always. Whether it's solving a specific problem or simply making something complicated easier. Leading positions in large companies are not filled based on personality or memory skills. They are given to people with a creative vision for the future of the company. (Kaufman, 2007; Sternberg & Lubart, 1990)

To get to know how creativity comes about, we need to have a look at the process. Very common is, what English social psychologist and pedagogue Graham Wallas' thought. (Britannica, 2018) Wallas was known for his study in human behaviour and became professor of political science at the University of London. His theory is appreciated by many scientists, it's „foundational in creativity research.“ (Sadler-Smith, 2015) Wallas divides the process into four stages (Figure 1) and calls them as follows. 1st Preparation, 2nd Incubation, 3rd Illumination and 4th Verification. (Wallas, 1926; Sadler-Smith, 2015)

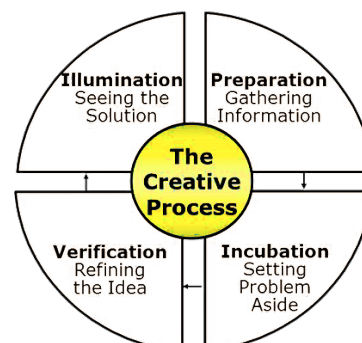


Figure 1: Wallas' Creative Process Model (Slideshare, 2018)

Wallas' four stages of the process of creativity

STAGE 1 – PREPARATION

For creativity to emerge it's important to create a foundation. A knowledgebase that arises from gathering information and identifying problems. This happens in the first stage of Wallas' theory of the creative process, Preparation. (Wallas, 1926) Also, during this first phase, a specific question often arises. You have to choose if you want to work in a group. Group- or teamwork is not without reason important for the creative process, whether at university or work. „Teamwork quality has positive effects on the relationship between domain-relevant skills and team efficiency.“ (Hoegl & Parboteeah, 2007) But that is not a general rule for all kinds of groups. According to Tim Harford, it depends on how groups are made up. He distinguishes between groups that consist of friends and groups that also have a stranger in the team. Problems were solved, more effectively, by groups that had a stranger in the team. During a TED talk, Harford argues that randomness added early in the process leads to more creative, crazier and better ideas. „The ugly font, the awkward stranger, the random move, these disruptions help us solve problems. But we do not feel that they are helping us. We feel they're getting in the way and so we resist.“ (Harford, 2015) While we don't like chaos and frustration, that doesn't mean it doesn't help us. One of those things that most students don't enjoy, but what assets a lot, is Design Thinking. This is done by applying different methods to solve problems and to develop new ideas. (Razzouk & Shute, 2012) Crazy Eights (method for quantity, eight ideas in eight minutes), SCAMPER (apply different prompts to your idea.), Thinking Hats (six metaphorical hats show the six different ways of thinking attitudes.) (Mandriko, 2017) All these methods are not particularly fun, almost tedious. Nevertheless, they help us to generate many different ideas.

STAGE 2 – INCUBATION

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But that does not always run smoothly. In most cases finding an idea turns out to be more difficult than expected, our creativity makes us wait. That's when the second stage of Wallas' theory, Incubation revolves. (Wallas, 1926) We're stuck, starting to doubt our idea, or worse, ourselves. Adam Grant calls a significant difference between these two kinds of doubts. „Self-doubt is paralyzing. It leads you to freeze. But idea doubt is energizing.“ (Grant, 2016a) If we doubt our idea and don't find the key to our problem, we begin delaying the search for a solution. But there are more reasons than just doubts that make us procrastinate. (Grant, 2016b) One of them is the fear of failure. This fear torments almost everyone at some point. (Schouwenburg, 1992) We cannot control mistakes, they sometimes even destroy all our work. But sometimes it's important not to take control, just let it rest on itself. It's a „cycle of creation and destruction, of control and letting go, of picking up the pieces and making something new.“ (Burststein, 2012) The Dictionary says about procrastination that it is the action of delaying or postponing something. (English Oxford Living Dictionaries, 2018) And if you do so, it will take longer later on. I mean, so far that's right. Of course, it takes us longer for something when we start later, but we already started, even though we procrastinate. And procrastination does affect our creativity. Adam Grant calls himself a 'precrastinator', he does everything right away, never delays anything. Together with one of his students, he did some experiments and proved that students who procrastinated moderately show increased creativity. Grant explains this like that: „It's only when you're told that you're going to work on this problem, and then you start procrastinating, but the task is still active in the back of your mind, that you start to incubate.“ (Grant, 2016a) Grant is not the only one who has realized that. Aaron Sorkin, a famous screenwriter, director and producer of the Westwing TV series, calls procrastination thinking. (Couric, 2015) Manoush Zomorodi also deals with this topic. She focuses on how daydreams increase creativity. (Zomorodi, 2017a) To digress in thought, to be spiritually absent.

A daydream is „a series of pleasant thoughts that distracts one's attention from the present.“ (English Oxford Living Dictionaries, 2018) They are gap fillers, small trips when we are bored. Daydreaming allows our mind to wander, „you start thinking a little bit beyond the conscious, a little bit into the subconscious.“ (Zomorodi, 2017b) As we do so, connections deep in our mind arise, that would otherwise not be there. (Zomorodi, 2017a)

STAGE 3 – ILLUMINATION

And now it happens. After all this doubt, rejecting ideas, procrastination and daydreaming. Eureka! The idea is there. You feel secure about it, see it where the idea could take you and how it will be. The third stage of the creative process, the enlightenment is here, Illumination.

STAGE 4 – VERIFICATION

Now the fourth step, Verification, is about consolidating the idea, working it out and improving it. But it can also be the moment when you realize, that this was probably nothing. This may be because we are too perfectionistic, and the idea hadn't enough time to mature. But it also could be just that, the idea belongs in the bin. It's important to distinguish between these two things. And if you decide to reject the idea, you know now that this frustration and destruction is just another step in the direction of the perfect idea.

Development of the visual piece

For the visual addition, I had already from the beginning, a rough idea. However, it's quite fitting that I delayed the concretization of the idea for a long time. After a few weeks of procrastination, I had an idea. On the bus when I was bored, which further confirms the theory of Manoush Zomorodi. (Zomorodi, 2017a) The visual piece is mainly for design students, but also pupils, freelancers, artists and all kind of creative thinkers. It should convey the knowledge that I came across during my research. Also, it should help them to trust their creativity and not to despair if the idea takes

longer to mature than usual. I will implement my idea as a magazine, which has an appearance to arouse the interest of the target group. In addition, a digital expansion will create a further, playful level of information, which should help to keep the readers' attention. This extension is projected through augmented reality on the existing magazine as an overlay using a smartphone. (TechTarget, 2018)

The cover gives a hint to the colour inside with a banderole to keep everything together. Each part of the magazine has a different colour set (two colours each). There is a darker, easy-to-read colour for text alongside a more radiant, lighter colour for the background.

In each section, the contents of the essay are picked up experimentally. There will also be deeper information implemented as continuous texts. My first idea was to use handwriting alongside analogue photographs with various dot matrix effects on coloured paper. But after a first elaboration, I realized that the design was messy, it was not possible to convey the message properly.

I decided to renounce a few of these aspects (dot matrix effects and coloured paper) and instead of using photography I created illustrations and graphics which were clearer to understand. The magazine is printed with a Risograph, which creates a unique artwork each time due to its special printing technique with stencils and intense colours, which reflects the diversity of creativity and the uniqueness of ideas. (DigitalArts, 2018)

So is procrastination now useful or not?

To come to an end, I think this question can't simply be answered with Yes or No. As already mentioned, the creative process is different to each of us, which is why we react differently to certain influences. We all have several reasons to procrastinate, some of us don't do it at all. (Urban, 2016) We also know that it isn't bad to reject ideas and start over completely, this is how we improve. But there is a thing, which is particularly important, especially in terms of procrastination, it should never get out of control.

When we realize that we're getting distracted, ending up watching "videos of Richard Feynman talking about magnets and or [...] watching interviews with Justin Bieber's mom" (Urban, 2016) on YouTube, then we should stop that. Adam Grant also shows that a bigger timespan of procrastination leads to less creativity.

Tim Urban calls this the Dark Playground, we supposedly have fun while feeling bad because we waste a lot of time, which in turn leads us to procrastinate more. A vicious circle. According to Urban, this cycle usually occurs when we procrastinate without a deadline, for example when we want to start our own business. „It's this long-term kind of procrastination that's much less visible and much less talked about [...]. It's usually suffered quietly and privately. And it can be the source of a huge amount of long-term unhappiness and regrets." (Urban, 2016)

To avoid these regrets, it's important, as with most things in life, to choose a healthy measure that helps and supports us. Well, enough procrastinated, now start working!

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