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Business Students' Beliefs about Creativity

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Abstract

With increasing global competition and turbulent environment, creativity is a sine qua non for organizational survival. Therefore, it is necessary to include creativity as one of the important components of business curriculum. The main intent is to increase business students' ability to deal with ongoing challenges they face at the work environment. The purpose of this study is to examine business students' perceptions about creativity in general, creativity in schools, and about manifestation of creativity in their working environments. The creativity survey was examined with non-traditional undergraduate business students with an average age of 40. The results showed while the students believed in the need for creativity in the work environment, many of them expressed an inability to actuate creativity in their current job roles. The students also expressed some dissonance between their quantitative and qualitative responses with regard to their ability to use their creativity in the work environment. Further discussion and suggestion are also considered.

Keywords: creativity, business, non-traditional undergraduate students

Introduction

Imagine that you take someone from the early 1900s and move into the present day. This time-traveler would be awestruck by a world filled with various wonders. These wonders stem from human creativity that contributes to this large-scale transformation. Florida (2002) predicted that in the near future the "creative class" will have a considerable impact on society. He differentiated between creative class and working class or service class on the nature of the task. The economic function of creative class is to "create new ideas, new technology, and/or new creative content" (p. 8). Pink (2005) extended this notion and argued that in the future the only jobs remaining will be those requiring creativity because others will be automated.

Maslow (1971) recognized that humans will censor their creativeness out of fear or weakness. With increasing global competition and turbulent environment, creativity is a sine qua non for organizational survival (Amabile, 1997; Cummings & Oldham, 1997; Maslow, 1971; Shipton, Fay, West, Patterson, & Birdi, 2005). Specifically, a strong linkage between climate and creative endeavor is contingent on the essentials of innovation for a savage business jungle, especially in a tempestuous environment with pressure of competition and production (Hunter, Bedell, & Mumford, 2007; Oldham & Cummings, 1996). Often, creativity requires that management change the mindset, even a conscious culture change. As Maslow (1971) pointed, "The creative attitude requires both courage and strength and most studies of creative people have reported one or another version of courage: stubbornness, independence, self-sufficiency, a kind of arrogance, strength of character, ego-strength" (p. 64). Indeed, manifestation of creativity sometimes needs courage to defy the crowd (Sternberg & Lubart, 1995). In addition, changing of culture must occur because, "The Voice of Judgment can stifle creativity for groups…. It is what we typically call 'groupthink,' the continual, albeit often subtle censoring of honesty and authenticity in a team" (Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski, & Flowers, 2004, p. 31). It is doable and the rewards could be fruitful. On the contrary, if an organization loses its creativity power, the chances are that it will also lose its competitive resources, energy, and commitment of its people (Amabile, 1998). Therefore, for the practical reason, it is imperative to include creativity capacity into the business curriculum. On the one hand, through being equipped with this ability, students will perform the tasks better; on the other hand, this performance will in turn positively contribute to the overall function of the organization.

The purpose of this study is to examine business students' perceptions about creativity in general, creativity in schools, and about manifestation of creativity in their working environments. By doing so, it is our hope to provide some useful insights for business educators to promote creativity in the pedagogy, and to blend the conceptualization of creativity in the curriculum.

The Characteristics of Creativity

In early times, creativity was not always appreciated and viewed as mystery. The creative action was the visitation of the Muse or divine force creative geniuses were serendipitously inspired by the divine intervention (Dimock, 1986; Haring-Smith, 2006; Simonton, 2006). In this light, human beings cannot create and only mimic the glory of God, or are inspired by the Muses (Ludwig, 1992; Niu & Sternberg, 2003; Simonton, 2000). The notion of creativity under the umbrella of the divine entity was dominant in the history of Western mindset for a long period of time. After Enlightenment, the concept of creativity had shifted from divine to individual, followed by achievement of science and technology (Craft, Gardner, & Claxton, 2008; Niu & Sternberg, 2006). In contemporary Western view, the general consensus of creativity is defined as the individuals (creators), processes (creating), and products (creations) with the features of usefulness, appropriateness, and novelty (Amabile, 1996; Csikszentmihalyi, 1996; Gardner, 1993; Taylor, 1988).

Creativity is hard to define and there is no single theory that dominates academia (Kleiman, 2008; Niu & Sternberg, 2001; Su, 2009). Creativity can be viewed as personal constructions, cognitive processes, thinking styles, or self-expression (Runco, 2003). Based on the creativity literature, several salient dispositions are also associated with creativity: autonomy, courage, wild interest openness, tolerance, risk taking, commitment to work, and aesthetic sensitivity (Barron & Harrington, 1981; Batey & Furnham, 2006; Runco, 2004).

However, the personality characteristics are not sufficient for creative performance (Runco, 2010). For example, Amabile (1983) contended that individual creativity is contingent on three elements: domain-relevant skills (knowledge and skills), creativity-relevant skills (cognitive style and working style), and task motivation (attitude and perception toward the task). Additionally, Sternberg and Lubart (1993, 1995) proposed six resources for creativity: intelligence, knowledge, thinking styles, personality, motivation, and environment. With regard to the massive energy involved in the act of creativity, Welkener (2004) argued that creativity needs more involvement than intellect; namely, it engages the whole person. From the perspective of organizational learning, Senge (2006) identified the importance of creativity and stated that

> The juxtaposition of vision (what we want) and a clear picture of current reality (where we are relative to what we want) generates what we call "creative tension"… the essence of personal mastery is learning how to generate and sustain creative tension in our lives. (p. 132)

The Importance of Creativity for Business Students

Creativity researchers have justified that creativity can be learned and taught through proper training programs with educators' conscious contributions and providing a creativity friendly environment (Davis, 2006; Reese & Parnes, 1970; Saracho, 2002). In line with this notion, some supporters suggested creative thinking and training pedagogy should blend into curricula, and with a more pluralistic approach will facilitate students to produce an increment of quantity and quality of ideas (Lau, Ng, & Lee, 2009; Parnes & Meadow, 1959; Puccio & Keller-Mathers, 2007). Ray and Myers (1989) discussed, "One of the main problems in U.S. business today is that there are too many ideas, not too few" (p. xi). This caused the faculty at Stanford to launch a course called Creativity in Business for the Master of Business Administration program.

A number of studies have examined the perceptions of creativity in business students. For example, Petocz, Reid, and Taylor (2009) utilized the qualitative approach to explore the conceptions of creativity and found three themes: definition, attribution, and comprehensive view from the analysis of description by participants. Their findings were in line with the creativity literature. Driver (2001) employed several salient treatments that encourage creativity in the classroom. The results of the survey from the business students demonstrated their perceptions of classroom environment which positively encourages their creative behaviors. Driver (2001) concluded that the benefits of "the integration of creativity into business education [is to] aid students in preparing for the creative workplace environments" (p. 33). Fontenot (1993) investigated the effects of Creative Problem Solving model on business people. The main finding showed the experimental group had more fluency and flexibility in data finding and problem finding than the control group. He suggested that through the implementation of creativity and problem-solving skills it would increase the creative operating levels of the business environments.

Method

This study utilized a cross-sectional survey design (Creswell, 2007). The participants completed the questionnaire at one point in time. The focus of this study is to examine the conceptualizations of creativity and issues related to it. Owing to the nature of this study, the

researchers outlined the rationale of the questionnaire and exhibited preliminary analyses that illustrate the usefulness of the notion.

Participants

Because of time constraints in conducting this research design, convenience sampling was used for this study. The participants were 24 business students, 17 female and 7 male. Their average age was 40 ($SD = 9.58$), with five people that did not disclose their age. The majority were Hispanic students (92%) and seniors (88%) in the undergraduate program. All participants were in an adult degree completion program recruited from the Leadership in Organization class in a south Texas Private University. Almost half of these students work for the same financial services company that is located close to the campus.

Instrument

Business students' beliefs about creativity were assessed with a questionnaire that consisted of three parts. The first part was demographical data: gender, age, and educational level. The second part included 14 statements. Responses were solicited using a 5- point Likert-type scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (5). The internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha) of index was acceptable with .714 (Bland & Altman, 1997). The last part of the survey included 4 questions that were open-ended, including (1) How do you define creativity? (2) What characteristics and abilities do you think are necessary for a person to be creative? (3) What do you think is the relationship between creativity and business? (4) Please describe how you use your creativity at the workplace.

Procedure

Once permission was granted by the instructor and Institutional Review Board, the questionnaire, along with a statement of informed consent was delivered to potential participants in the classroom at the beginning of regularly scheduled class. The instrument was distributed to all students attending on an 8-week summer semester in the 2012-2013 academic year. The instrument allowed for complete anonymity because student names were not required on the questionnaire.

Results

Prior to analysis of the data from the survey, principal factors extraction with varimax rotation was performed to estimate number of factors. Five factors were extracted with loadings of variables on factors over .45 (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007). Five factors were creativity traits, creativity and intelligence, teaching creativity, creativity in business school, and creativity at work place.

Table 1 shows business students' beliefs about creativity. The first factor is creativity traits; over half of students believed everyone has creativity ability. However, over 50% of students considered that creative thinking is different from problem solving ($m = 2.79$, $SD = 1.10$). With regard to creativity and intelligence, most participants noted that there is no relationship between creativity and intelligence. The third factor illustrates that most business students should be equipped with creative thinking capacity ($m = 4.29$, $SD = .81$). In addition,

teachers can foster creativity in the classrooms ($m = 3.75$, $SD = .68$). Concerning creativity in business school, most students pointed out creativity should be one of the components in the curriculum ($m = 3.46$, $SD = .78$). Finally, students expressed that they had positive experiences of the manifestation of creativity in their working environments.

Two of the students who answered the Likert-style questions did not answer the qualitative questions. In the analysis of four open-ended questions, two main themes were found. First, they did not feel that they are empowered to utilize their creativity at work. The second theme included the students' belief that creativity in the workplace must be used to improve or design tasks and processes.

Examples of the first theme are summed up by a female who espoused that "only some businesses allow you to be creative." A male indicated: "I work with contracts; so there is no creativity-everything is black and white. On my off time I like to build things. That's when I use creativity." When asked about how they were able to use their creativity at work, one response from a female was poignant, "Not allowed, was laid off due to fear of taking over someone else's job. Jealousy!" Another female responded, "My creativity is not used as much as I would like, but mostly it's used to manage my own time."

The second theme was expressed through how respondents viewed the important characteristics of creativity as "thinking outside of the box" when building or improving processes or tasks. Others expressed that it was the creation of an original idea or work. Their responses indicated that creativity involved problem solving. The terms "open-minded, quick thinking, critical thinking, risk taking, encourage others, and flexibility" were used to describe characteristics of creativity. Individual responses included the following thoughts: "Try to do the same task in a different way." Another stated, "Is a change method to complete the same task in a positive more efficient way; to think outside the box."

The students were aware of the definition and use of creativity. However, they did not demonstrate an ability to identify how they were using it in a meaningful way in their current jobs, or how it was important for business in theoretical way.

Discussion

The research findings documented in the current study were consistent with the literature to some extent. Most people in the current study tended to believe that individuals have the possession of creativity and it could be increased by proper trainings from teachers (National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education, 1999). This notion is in line with literature that creativity is not a mysterious ability, instead a ubiquitous and shared trait among people (Guilford, 1950; Sternberg, 2006). In fact, during the first class, the students were asked to express the most important thing they wanted to learn in the class. One of the students indicated that he wanted to understand the creativity of leadership.

Most of the business students recognized that creativity is independent of intelligence, which is supported by the literature (Guilford, 1956; Mumford, 2003). Most students in this study believed that creative thinking is different from problem solving. According to creativity literature, however, creativity manifests in everyday life through creative problem solving. In other words, creativity could be dichotomized to two categories: arts heavily rely on creativity functioning for expression; or, science and everyday activity that need to use another dimension of creativity to solve problems (Treffinger, 1995; Runco, 2010). Moreover, Gardner (1988) clearly defined that "a creative individual is viewed as a person who regularly solves problems or fashions products in one or more domains of activity" (p. 9). This view of product creation was

in multiple respondents thoughts. Senge (2006) also stated, "Truly creative people use the gap between vision and current reality to generate energy for change" (p. 142). Although there is discrepancy between laypersons and students of creativity, it is likely that the implicit understandings of creativity in laypersons are the approaches that they demonstrate or use to evaluate the creativity.

The second major finding shows that business students welcome creativity that is blended into the current curriculum. Furthermore, students considered the important role of teachers who foster creative thinking in the classrooms. It is hoped that business schools could hear the voice from students and rethink the imperative development of creative capacity for business students. Most important, in order to bringing this creativity quality into their works, it is necessary for those students to learn how to think creatively. As a result, it is the responsibility of the teachers and institutions to actualize the maximization of individual creative thinking by formal education. With the information disclosed from this survey, the instructor of the Leadership in Organization class approached the dean about adding a creativity in business course. It is good to see the potential positive effects of the current study in benefiting business students.

The majority of students expressed their positive experience in terms of creativity at their work in the quantitative responses. However, their qualitative responses demonstrated that many are incapable of using their creativity in the current roles that they hold. The two different responses about need and actual use appear to contradict. This observation makes the researchers question if the companies employing these respondents are missing opportunities to use their employees' creative talents? Or as Ray and Myers (1989) reminded us that there is a,

> Voice of Judgment that all of us have within. You might think that the inhibiting pronouncements come from your associates, or the mores of your business environment, or society as a whole, but if you allow them to stop you, it's your own internal broadcast you are listening to. (p. 40)

The leaders of organizations should recognize the power of creativity. They should not only encourage creativity, but also open their minds to welcome any positive feedback. Deferring judgments is the first step to generate multiple potential solutions (Parnes & Meadow, 1959). It is also an imperative learning process for organizational change. Senge et al. (2004) stated, "Deeper levels of learning create increasing awareness of the larger whole—both as it is and as it is evolving—and actions that increasingly become part of creating alternative futures" (p. 11). In order to embrace a bright future, leaders of organizations should first listen to the voice from their followers and defer judgment at the same time. By doing so, the change momentum will start from the healthy reciprocal comment.

In regard to the relationship between creativity and business, the students struggled to respond to the question due to their experienced dissonance in the workplace. They agree that there is importance in business. A couple of the respondents agreed that both include vision. One male stated, "Creativity keeps businesses relevant" which seems to be similar to the input by another male, "In order for business to grow and remain competitive they must be led by creative people or people that are open to creative ideas."

Limitation and Recommendation

Although the current study extends the knowledge of people's perception of creativity, it is important to note a few limitations. First, convenience sampling was used for this study from a

small, private university in the United States. Further, the participants were only 24 non-traditional adult college students. Therefore, the generalizability of the study's findings and the representativeness of the sample to the population are questionable. In addition, varying geographic and cultural regions were not considered in the present study. As a result, further research should consider broadening the scope of the sample to include a variety of universities with different classes, different sizes, and affiliations. Finally, owing to the nature of this survey design, the possibility of a biased sample could occur. The data collection procedures allowed the participants to self-select into this study.

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Table 1
Mean and Standard Deviation of Five Factors from the Survey (n = 24)

Factors	*M*	*SD*
Creativity traits		
Creativity is not innate; it can be facilitated.	3.13	1.15
Creativity is a characteristic of all people.	3	1.22
Creative thinking is similar to the thinking required to solve the problem.	2.79	1.10
Creativity and intelligence		
A very intelligent person is also very a creative person.	2.54	1.06
Academic achievement is a good index of creativity.	2.42	.88
When a person has a high degree of knowledge in business, then it is difficult for the person to be creative in that area.	2.29	.86
Teaching creativity		
Creative thinking is an important skill in business.	4.29	.81
The teacher can facilitate students' creativity.	3.75	.68
Creativity in business school	7.71	1.30
Environment is necessary for the facilitation of creativity.	3.54	1.02
Business curriculum should include the development of creativity capacity.	3.46	.78
Creativity at work place		
I display my creativity in a variety of ways.	4.08	.78
I have a lot of opportunities in work to show my creativity.	3.46	1.18
My working environment welcomes creativity.	3.75	1.15
My boss encourages employees to use creativity to do the job.	3.75	1.23

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