



Short Communication

Style: A Key New Dimension for Creativity Research and Development

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Abstract

Understanding, recognizing, nurturing, and developing creativity in individuals, teams, and organizations has become a major priority for research and practice. Cognitive psychology has played a major role in these efforts. The preponderance of research has focused on level, or degree of capability, and cognitive psychology has contributed to identifying intellectual abilities and characteristics associated with creativity. More recent efforts have identified style, or preferred modality, as another category of characteristics to be considered in understanding and developing creative talent. This additional dimension holds great promise for this important area of work. This article presents the essence of what this dimension means, and some of the key areas for its potential value for future research and practice.

Understanding and developing creativity is a widely held aim for both scholars and practitioners. The primary thrust of research has focused on identifying and improving the level of creativity within the individual. This emphasis can be traced to early work to identify unique characteristics of geniuses, and ultimately to the cognitive abilities and skills associated with high-level creative performance [1,2]. Work on creative cognition and metacognition has promoted the broadening of creative abilities and has introduced cognitive style as a construct that can help explain everyday creative performance [3-5].

Kogan [6] was one of the earliest scholars to link cognitive styles to the field of creativity research and laid the foundation for the level-style distinction. In distinguishing styles from intelligence and creative ability, Kogan [6] asserted:

Cognitive styles can be most directly defined as individual variations in *modes* of perceiving, remembering, and thinking, or as distinctive ways of apprehending, storing, transforming, and utilizing information. It may be noted that *abilities* also involve the foregoing properties, but a difference in emphasis should be noted: Abilities concern level of skill—the more and

less of performance—whereas cognitive styles give greater weight to the *manner* and *form* of cognition.

Some styles have been shown to relate more to ability or to be more value-laden. Others can be considered more purely stylistic having no relationship to level and considered value-neutral. It is this sort of style upon which Kirton [7-9] has promoted the argument for making a creativity level-style distinction. Simply put, creativity level addresses the question: How creative am I? The focus is on ability, degree of competence or capacity, or how well one uses their creative potential. The creativity style dimension addresses the question: How am I creative? The emphasis is on preference, modality, propensity, or how people prefer to use the creative potential they possess.

The productive potential of making this distinction has been detailed elsewhere [10,11]. By way of summary, there are potential benefits for making this distinction when considering characteristics of people, the creative process, creative outcomes, and products, as well as places that are conducive to creativity.

When it comes to understanding and developing creativity in people, style helps include a diversity of individuals by getting



beyond the bias that only certain individual styles are creative. Creative talent is not limited to only those who ‘think outside the box.’ There is a tremendous amount of creativity aimed at improving things or ‘getting back into the box’ [12]. This helps us consider creative potential more broadly. Measures that assess style (and not level) have been shown to help individuals better understand themselves and others, and, as a result, significantly improve teamwork and creative collaboration. For example, Main, et al. [13] experimentally examined the impact of providing students feedback on their problem-solving style and, after controlling for level of creative ability, found that students armed with these insights increased their creative performance.

There are many different models of the creative process [14–16]. Creative style should be distinct from any specific model of the creative process. People need to be able to engage in all the stages and phases of any model of the creative process [17]. Kirton [9] indicated that “cognitive level, style, and process are separate concepts, but they interact in problem-solving.” Certain styles will exhibit preferences for specific kinds of cognitive strategies when engaging in creative problem-solving [18]. Understanding an individual’s preferred style, and that of others, can help them better navigate their way through the creative process [19].

When it comes to creative outcomes, creative style can play a role in helping individuals, teams, and organizations understand the implications of different preferences for radical or exploratory versus incremental or developmental creativity. Different kinds of creative outcomes may call for the use of natural preferences for different kinds of problem-solving [20]. They may also call for those with styles that are different from the kind of desired outcomes to engage in coping behavior or to ‘flex’ their preferred behavior.

Cognitive and problem-solving styles can play an important role in establishing conditions that are conducive to diverse preferences. Individuals who have different creativity styles are likely to need different working environments to thrive. For example, those who hold an exploratory problem-solving style will be more at home working within a permeable paradigm or loose structure, whereas those with a more developer preference will function better within clear boundaries. Deliberately setting appropriate conditions for a diversity of creative styles enhances the likelihood of improving creative performance [21].

Creative style does not replace or negate the importance of creative level. Considering style adds a lens that can make multiple productive contributions to releasing creative talent [22]. This additional perspective can add value for including diverse points of view in the pursuit of everyday creativity.

Conclusion

Given the importance of understanding and developing creative talent, a relatively new dimension that focuses on the style of creativity holds great promise. Adding this new lens to previous research can help reexamine how characteristics

can be better sorted and characterized to remove some of the ‘muddles’ in the literature. It can also help guide future research in obtaining a fuller and more inclusive picture of creative talent. Exploring a diversity of cognitive and problem-solving styles can help us get beyond seeing creativity as limited to the sole province of the few genius-level individuals and open pathways for the increased manifestation of everyday creativity.

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