Generation Y’s Antecedents to the Creative Learning Style

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Abstract

The Australian higher education sector, shaped to meet the needs of Generation X students, today comprises of a multicultural student cohort where Generation Y is fast becoming the most dominant generation. The importance of nurturing creativity in business education and Generation Y’s increasing role in helping organisations fulfil their mission is increasingly being recognised. This paper presents a definition of the creative learning style and explores the demographic and psychographic factors that may explain a greater willingness for Generation Y to engage with the creative learning style. This study found that members of Generation Y who hold low uncertainty avoidance, low precision assurance seeking or high task completion seeking psychographic characteristics were more willing to adopt a creative learning style.

Literature Review

The proportion of students studying at universities who are Generation Y is increasing with each passing year and will soon become the predominant student group (Paine Schofield and Honore 2011). The Generation Y classification has been most commonly cited as the birth years of 1977 to 1994/1995 (see: Bartlett 2004; Huang and Petrick 2010; Moscardo and Benckendorff 2010; Wolburg and Pokrywcynski 2001), and has been reported to equate to 25% of Australia’s population (ABS 2009) which is comparable with the American (Heaney and Gleeson 2008) and European (europa.eu 2011) populations. Generation Y have been identified as ...team oriented, optimistic, trusting of authority, technologically savvy, practical, community oriented, able to multi-task, achievement focused, goal oriented etc. when compared with Generation X (Griffin, et al. 2008, p. 62). This description of Generation Y is also consistent with earlier research conducted by Heaney (2007) and Bakewell and Mitchell (2003). Busch, Venkitachalam and Richards (2008) see Generation Y as enthusiastic and highly valuing their own opinions. While some aspects of Generation Y membership might suggest that they might have a creative learning preference, other aspects suggest this may not be the case. Even if Generation Y has a higher creative learning preference than the generation of students that came before them, Generation X, what the antecedents are to this learning style preference is underexplored.

It is highly important to nurture creativity in business education as Generation Y’s role in helping organisations to fulfil their mission is increasing. Jackson (2010, p. ix) states that the world needs people who can combine and integrate their knowledge, skills and capabilities in creative and adventurous ways to work with complexity, create wealth and prosperity and enrich enterprises, societies and cultures. Within the applied disciplines like business, particularly marketing, this creativity is often associated with the role of the entrepreneur in creating value through innovation. These innovations can range from incremental to radical and may involve paradigm innovations. This creativity can be expressed at a functional, business and corporate level and is equally applicable to the private, public and not for profit sectors. For business students who will emerge from their education with the growing expectation that they can contribute to these different types of innovation there is a growing
need to understand the creative learning style that students bring into a university context and the antecedents that shaped this preference.

Generation Y’s level of willingness to engage in creative activities and the antecedents to this willingness is an important question as much of the foundation literature on how we unlock creative potential in business students is based on insights gained with Generation X. This paper presents our definition of the creative learning style which has been contextually linked to existing learning models. We have defined the creative learning style as a preference for learning that is primarily focused on learning through experimentation, searching for new opportunities, and active engagement with novel ideas and trying something new rather than searching for and valuing: continuity and facts, expert approval, sequential thinking and the teacher-driven learning approach. The creative learning style preference is argued to be characterised as having a higher willingness to engage in creative learning activities and a lower need to engage in analytical problem solving learning activities. This paper explores the factors that may explain a greater willingness to engage with the creative learning style. Specifically, we explore the influence of Generation Y’s demographic characteristics of: gender, nationality, university educational experience, and working experience and their psychographic characteristics of: uncertainty avoidance and structure seeking and task completion seeking personality traits. This paper explores two research questions: “do Generation Y’s personality characteristics influence their adoption of a creative learning style?” and “does this vary by Generation Y’s demographic profile?”

Business course education comprises of learning experiences that require both analytical and creative problem solving skills (Mitsis and Foley 2010). Mitsis and Foley (2010) add that learning activities tend to focus on teaching students how to be successful using rational problem solving models that have a predefined sequence of defined steps or stages. It is well documented in the extant literature that students who enter higher education are not only conditioned by their previous educational experiences but by the educational experience within their course (Kolb and Kolb 2005). Learning style preferences have also been noted to be shaped by students’ personalities, abilities and cultural backgrounds (Ballard and Clanchy 1997). Differences in culture has also been identified as resulting in different attitudes towards both knowledge and knowledge acquisition (Hall and Hall 1990; Hampden-Turner 1994; Hampsden-Turner and Trompenaars 1993; Hofstede 1980; Hofstede 1991; Hofstede 2001; Hofstede, et al. 2010; Hofstede and Hofstede 2005; House and Javidan 2004; Trompenaars 1993; Trompenaars 2003). Stes, Gijbels and Van Petegem (2008) claim that the teacher-focused approach to teaching creates a learning for reproduction situation, whereas a student-focused approach to teaching is associated with an active approach to learning. Cheung and Chan (2009) identified that the cultural value of uncertainty avoidance (one’s level of comfort towards ambiguous or unknown situations) significantly influenced perceptions of university education and that low uncertainty avoidance ratings were found to correspond to greater tolerance towards educational innovation. Nevertheless, it is unclear how this uncertainty avoidance culturally-anchored value may influence the analytic or creative problem solving preference. Therefore, students’ previous educational experiences, uncertainty avoidance culturally-anchored values and nationality may shape learning and problem solving style preferences.

The teaching role has been conceptualised by Knowles, Holton III and Swanson (1998) as creating opportunities for students to learn and that the task of learning needs to be driven by the student. Despite this, it is common practice within analytical problem solving to begin
with problem definition which is provided by the teacher. We argue that creative problem solving should emphasise both problem definition improvement and elaboration which is more in keeping with adult learning. Our conjecture is also consistent with Kolb’s (1976) accommodator and converger learning styles and Honey and Mumford’s (1992; 1995) activist and pragmatist learning styles. It has been argued by Biggs (1994) that a deep learning style is the opposite to a surface learning style and seems to have similarities to what Kolb (1976) referred to as divergers and assimilators, and to what Honey and Mumford (1992; 1995) identified as reflectors and theorists. Hence, we argue that a creative learning style exists when a student has a stronger preference for a learning style that Kolb would see as an accommodator, and Honey and Mumford would see as an activist and a lower preference for the learning style that Kolb called an assimilator and Honey and Mumford referred to as theorists. According to Honey and Mumford’s (1992; 1995) framework, activists are characterised by preferring situational learning, that is business games and competitive teamwork tasks; whereas the theorist learning style has a preference for highly structured activities that are offered as part of a concept, model or theory.

The student-driven learning style has been described by Hancock, Bray and Nason (2002) as thriving in a less structured classroom, where students influence time allocation and methods of learning and openly communicate ideas. The teacher’s role in a student-driven environment involves encouraging students to experience new activities or topics, and be a channel to assist in establishing and enforcing rules, as well as encouraging review and conclusions on lesson objectives (Hancock, et al. 2002). Therefore, it could be argued that the student-driven environment encourages students to adopt a more creative learning style. The analytic or teacher-driven learning style is opposite to a student-driven environment where students would exhibit low levels of active experimentation and attempt to understand the material taught within a theoretical framework of ideas and concepts (Hassall and Joyce 2001).

It is also plausible that certain personality types may also be more associated with the creative learning style. We suggest that a personality that has a high focus on defined structure and efficient task completion and or precision in decision making may prefer to only engage in analytic problem solving; and be unwilling to engage in self-initiated creative problem solving. These students are more likely to perceive information concretely rather than intuitively, prefer courses that emphasise rational problem solving with clear feedback from a teacher on correct procedure and the learning experience when judgements are made after all the facts are available. It is a personality type that dislikes ambiguity and seeks environments that minimise this (Benfari 1999; Lubit 2004; Nahavandi 2006; Yukl 2006). In other words, a preference for analytical problem solving is reflected in a lower creative learning style preference.

The Research

This paper presents an exploration of Generation Y’s perceptions of the creative learning style within an Australian higher education setting. Specifically, we address two research questions: “do Generation Y’s personality characteristics influence their adoption of a creative learning style?” and “does this vary by Generation Y’s demographic profile?” These questions have important implications for fostering creativity in future business graduates. There are three hypotheses examined within this study.
H₁: Generation Y’s demographic and psychographic characteristics will all be significantly correlated with the creative learning style preference at the zero order level.

H₂: Generation Y’s creative learning style preference will be influenced by differences in their demographic profile.

H₃: Generation Y’s psychographic characteristics will each explain unique variation in the creative learning style.

An opportunity sample of three hundred and eighteen business students who were Generation Y studying in an Australian university based in metropolitan Melbourne participated in this study. Participants were asked to disclose their gender (male = one), where 115 were male and 203 female. All participants were asked to state their nationality (primary country of citizenship). A total of 20 nations were identified: Australia (85.5%); China and Sri Lanka (1.9% respectively); India (1.6%); Malaysia (1.3%); Hong Kong (0.9%); Austria, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, France, Mauritius, Singapore, The Philippines, The United Kingdom and Vietnam (0.6% respectively); and Burma, Indonesia, Laos, New Zealand, The Netherlands and Thailand (0.3% respectively). Nationality was coded Australian equal to one and all other nationalities equal to zero. Eighty two percent of participants held paid jobs in the workforce (working equal to one); and 297 participants were studying a business degree at the undergraduate level (undergraduate student educational experience equal to one).

All participants were asked to respond to Robertson and Hoffman’s (2000) uncertainty avoidance culturally-anchored value scale derived from Hofstede’s (1980) cultural dimension (α = 0.83). The culturally-anchored value responses were coded one equal to strongly disagree through to five strongly agree. Honey and Mumford’s (1992) learning style questionnaire was used to collect the creative learning style data from respondents whereby students were asked to rate to what extent they agreed with their activist and theorist learning style dimension items on a six point likert scale, where zero equals strongly disagree through to five strongly agree. The creative learning style was calculated by dividing the activist dimension score by the theorist dimension score. The two personality characteristics are new scales. The task completion seeking personality characteristic scale is a 12 item scale (α = 0.71), derived from Honey and Mumford’s (1992) pragmatist learning style preference, whereby students were asked to rate statements on a six point scale (zero equal to strongly disagree to five strongly agree). Indicative questions include: “In discussions I like to get straight to the point”; “In discussions I get impatient with irrelevancies and digressions”; and “I do whatever is expedient to get the job done”. The precision assurance seeking characteristic scale (α = 0.79), is a nine item scale derived from Honey and Mumford’s (1992) reflector learning style preference. Indicative questions include: “I take care over the interpretation of data available to me and avoid jumping to conclusions” and “I like to reach a decision carefully after weighing up many alternatives.

Three types of analyses were conducted in order to explore the relationships between Generation Y’s demographic characteristics of: gender, nationality, university educational experience, and working experience and their psychographic characteristics of: uncertainty avoidance, precision assurance seeking and task completion seeking, with the adoption of a creative learning style. The first type of analysis conducted was a Pearson correlation analysis between the demographic and psychographic characteristics with the creative learning style, to identify whether there are any significant associations. The second type of analysis conducted was a set of four independent sample t-tests to explore whether differences in
Generation Y’s demographic profile influenced the creative learning style; and the third type of analysis conducted was an OLS regression to establish which if any psychographic characteristics explained unique variation in the creative learning style.

The Pearson correlation analysis revealed that the psychographic characteristics of: uncertainty avoidance and precision assurance seeking had highly significant negative (p<0.01) zero-order correlations with the creative learning style \( (r = -0.211\) and \(-0.412\) respectively). Therefore hypothesis one was only partially supported as not all demographic and psychographic variables had significant zero-order correlations with the creative learning style. The second stage of analysis involved four independent sample t-tests to test hypothesis two. The Levene’s test for all four independent sample t-tests (gender, nationality, educational experience and work experience respectively) resulted in a probability greater than 0.5, which assumes that the population variances are relatively equal. The t-tests for gender, nationality, educational experience and work experience, revealed that there was no difference between Generation Y’s demographic profile and their likelihood to adopt a creative learning style: gender \( (t(316) = -1.055, p = 0.292)\); nationality \( (t(316) = 1.285, p = 0.202)\); educational experience \( (t(316) = 0.444, p = 0.661)\); and work experience \( (t(316) = -0.138, p = 0.890)\). Hence hypothesis two was not supported. The third stage of analysis involved an OLS Regression to address hypothesis three. The multiple \( R \) (0.439) for the regression was significantly different from zero and the \( F \) value \( (3, 316) = 25.017, p < 0.01 \). The results suggest that the psychographic characteristics of: uncertainty avoidance, precision assurance seeking and task completion seeking explained 19.3% (18.5% adjusted) of the variation in the creative learning style \( (R^2 = 0.193, \text{adj. } R^2 = 0.185)\). The standardised regression coefficients (Betas) for all three psychographic characteristics: uncertainty avoidance (-0.121), precision assurance seeking (-0.392) and task completion seeking (0.107) were significant. Of the 19.3% explained variance, the squared semi-partial correlations indicate that precision assurance seeking explained 14.3%, uncertainty avoidance explained 1.4% and task completion seeking explained 1.1% of the unique variation in the creative learning style when all variables were entered into the equation. Thus hypothesis three was fully supported.

**Conclusion**

These results suggest that members of Generation Y that have a tendency to adopt a creative learning style are low assurance seeking students. Student that have a combination of a high uncertainty avoidance culturally-anchored value, high precision assurance seeking and low task completion seeking personality traits are less likely to engage in creative leaning style activities. From the perspective of an academic teaching creativity and developing curriculum for creativity, it’s important for educators to be aware of the types of learning activities students with these psychographic profiles thrive upon. Types of learning activities include a need: for listening and sharing ideas, opportunities to use individual insight, and using their own experiences as a basis for learning.

Further research is needed on how people who have high certainty assurance needs can be made to feel more comfortable with using creative problem solving approaches as part of their business education.


