Learning Style and Creativity

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There are consistencies in the ways people are different from each other, tendencies that seem to influence their choice of actions, even thoughts.

These habitual patterns of thinking and acting mean that some ideas will be more obvious to us than others. Part of the process of deliberate creativity is to look for those less obvious ideas, so understanding these factors and their impact on us should help us look outside these "boxes". In addition, as we work with others to understand and solve problems, the same differences can needlessly interfere with communication and cooperation.

One way to think of facilitation, the leadership of teams in creativity, is to help them think in the same modes at the same time, choosing a pattern of styles appropriate to the issues of the project.

Kolb's Learning Style Inventory

David Kolb's Learning Style Inventory (LSI) is a good tool to help people begin to understand that other perfectly rational people can see things differently, or pay attention to different aspects of the problem. Kolb selected two dimensions, the degree to which people preferred to be active or reflective when they learn or solve problems, and the degree to which they pay more attention to the

direct concrete experience or the explainable abstract aspects of the situation. Active people tend to focus on a single alternative and begin action, while the more reflective like to keep open multiple possibilities. Those with a tendency toward abstract conceptualization like to focus on the explainable and definable aspects of situations and things, while those more interested in concrete experience are more interested in specific things and sensory aspects. (Note that emotions are experienced directly by the individual, and are considered concrete in this model.)

When developing the instrument, Kolb discovered that people who did best at the standard tests of divergent thinking, like brainstorming uses for a brick, tended to be more reflective and to pay more attention to the direct concrete experience aspects. So he labeled people in this quadrant as "divergers". These folks tend to prefer to be artists, therapists, and human resource professionals.

People in the opposite quadrant, who tended to be more active, but focused more on the explainable abstract aspects of a situation, seemed to do extremely well on tests in which you must converge on a single answer, such as multiple choice tests or IQ tests. So he labeled these people "convergers". These folks tended to prefer engineering and planning professions.

It is interesting that much of the early approaches to deliberate creativity can be seen as attempts to get people of a converger style to behave as if they were of the diverger style. Reactions to brainstorming, such as the invention of Nominal Group Technique can be seen as the preferred approach of those of the converger style.

Kolb found that those who preferred the reflective abstract way of learning liked to take in lots of different and conflicting information and find ways to integrate them. So he labeled them "assimilators". These people tend to become scientists and PhD college faculty.

Kolb Learning Style

concrete

Accomodator | Diverger

active — — — *reflective*

Converger | Assimilator

abstract
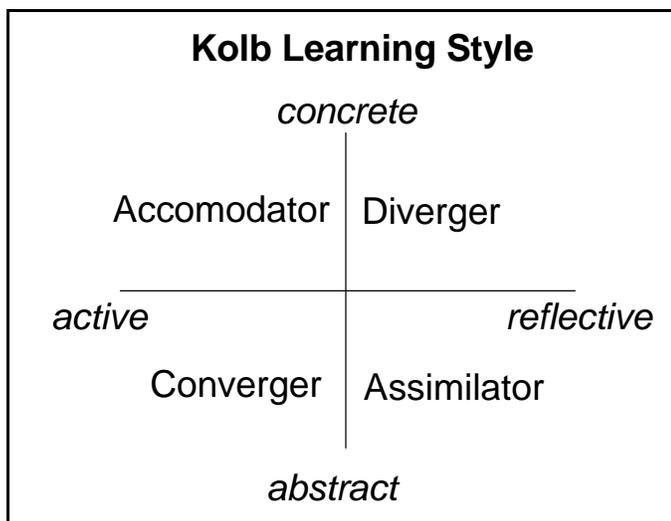
Finally, he looked at the active people focused on direct concrete realities and found that they were constantly making those adjustments to the plan which are necessary to accomplish their goals, and labeled them as "accomodators". These people make great project managers, production supervisors, and salespeople.

Kolb points out that the most effective learning involves all quadrants, a process of reflecting on experience, developing new theories, making plans, and acting upon those plans. Then, reflecting on that experience and continuing in what he called the "learning cycle". Educational programs can be seen as fitting the various styles. Most engineering programs are entirely converger, with the assimilator types moving to the sciences where comparing multiple theories and approaches is acceptable. Trade schools are generally accomodator focused, with little time spent on theory. Since MBA programs were originally designed for engineers, it makes sense that many of them operate almost entirely in the converger model.

But the complete knowledge a manager needs requires rubbing theory up against reality, and reflecting on what happens. This fuller learning cycle is labeled "experiential learning" in the education literature.

Trait vs Type

When using categories like diverger and accomodator to think about people, it is useful to think of patterns of traits rather than particular types. For example, two people almost identical in scores could be on opposite side of a dividing line and thus being scored as different types, while people whose scores fall into the same type might have very great differences in the underlying traits. So when using the LSI to improve your understanding of others, it might be more useful to say that an individual tends to be more reflective than you are, or more abstract.

On the other hand, some of the fun research has been done on the types. For example, professions and those in college majors tend to have the same style. Further, those whose style is furthest from the others are more likely to change majors or change professions, and are most likely to choose one which better fits their style.

Traits, Styles, and Facilitation

Facilitation is the style of leadership in which one makes it easier for others to succeed. People seem to be more effective in problem solving if they proceed through the quadrants of this problem solving cycle. So it might seem that divergers would be the best leaders for the fact finding and value assessment phases of a problem, assimilators are best at bringing together the disparate elements into clearer models, convergers are better at devising plans based on those insights and models, and accomodators best at getting the plan into action.

However, the team needs to bring all their various perspectives together in each aspect of the process, so in fact what is needed is for all team members to reflect concretely in the first phase, for all to reflect abstractly in the second, and so forth.

So the tools of facilitation are designed to help people of other styles to function in the needed quadrant.

Styles of Creativity

Michael Kirton has developed a scale called the Kirton Adaptor-Innovator Inventory (KAI). He found that people with high levels of creativity might focus their creativity in quite different ways. If you think of the idea of "out of the box thinking" and the idea that every problem consists of multiple boxes, those who tend to find creative ways to solve the problem without changing or violating any of the boxes are labeled as Adapters. The more boundaries a creative person tends to violate, the more they are seen as having an Innovator style.

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