Can Creativity Be Taught? Fostering Creative Minds for Careers in the Apparel Industry

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Abstract
The purpose of this study is to understand the role of creativity in the apparel industry and how the need for the development of creativity in future industry professionals could be met.

Keywords
Creativity, apparel, teaching, industry

Disciplines
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Comments
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Creativity is essential to organizational innovation and long-term success (Ford & Gioia, 2000). Indeed, it was identified as the most effective approach for maintaining competitive advantage (DiLiello & Houghton, 2006). In today’s global world, consumers have unlimited options and are less loyal, and creativity becomes the only sustainable advantage in the marketplace (Miller, 2000). Creativity has been studied from the diverse perspectives of business, cognitive science, philosophy, psychology, and, art, among others (Hennessey & Amabile, 2010). However, its multi-dimensional nature, which encompasses individual traits and behaviors as well as the interaction between creative individuals, their ideas, and society, makes it difficult to define and capture (Runco, 2004). The elusive definition of creativity adds to the challenges in fostering creative minds to meet the demands of the 21st century workplace (Gow, 2000). Even though the fashion and apparel industry has long been associated with creativity (Breward, 2003), very limited research on this topic exists. To our knowledge, industry professionals’ views on creativity development have not been examined. The purpose of the study was to understand the role of creativity in the apparel industry and how the need for the development of creativity in future industry professionals could be met. The research questions included: (a) the importance of creativity within the industry and (b) how creativity can be developed.

A qualitative methodology was used to obtain “rich” or “thick” data from the industry insiders (Esterberg, 2002). Individual, semi-structured interviews were utilized to collect the data. This approach allowed participants to explore the research questions in their own words by freely expressing ideas and opinions. Following an interview protocol ensured a systematic approach to data collection (Kvale, 1996). Examples of questions are: “What companies in the apparel industry are creative?” “Do you use creativity in your position? Please give examples.” “Do you think creativity can be taught? How?” A purposive, snowball sampling maximized the acquisition of relevant information (Esterberg, 2002). Upon gaining institutional review board approval, the authors contacted members of a Midwestern university’s textiles and apparel program advisory board to invite them to participate in the study. Each interviewee was asked to recommend other potential research participants. About half of the interviews were conducted in person, with the remainder completed over the telephone. With informants’ consent, all interviews were audio taped and transcribed. Interviews ranged from one to two hours in length.

We interviewed twenty-eight apparel professionals from diverse company backgrounds, positions, regions of the country, and with various years of experience in the industry. Five participants (18%) were male. A phenomenological interpretive approach was used to analyze the data. Interview transcripts were first analyzed by the three authors independently through an
iterative part-to-whole process (McCracken 1988). The analyses and interpretation resulted in emergence of significant themes that described participants’ experiences and perceptions related to creativity (van Manen, 1990). Next, the researchers worked together to compare, discuss, and finalize emergent themes into a consistent whole utilizing a back-and-forth, part-to-whole process of interpretation (Spiggle, 1994). The major themes formed three topical areas.

The first topical area, Creativity in the Apparel Industry, summarized professionals’ opinions on the importance of creativity in the industry. The three themes within the topic explored creativity across diverse companies and positions and the role of creativity in one’s career. The second topical area, Innate or Acquired: Can Creativity Be Taught?, presented participants’ views on the nature of the phenomenon as an inherent or a learned skill, and, subsequently, if it was possible to teach creativity. The third topical area, Strategies for Developing Creativity, described professionals’ suggestions on how creativity can be enhanced in students to better prepare them for careers in the apparel industry. Four major strategies formed the four themes in this topical area: formal training, exposure to the world, cultivating divergent thinking, and personality advancement.

Because all innovation begins with creative ideas, it is essential to understand industry professionals’ perspectives on the topic. The results of this research further our understanding of the use and development of creativity within the apparel industry; important for theory development and practical implications of teaching creativity to students. The integration of creativity development into apparel education will aid students in preparing for the creative workplace environments that they will undoubtedly experience upon graduation.

References: