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Building Humanistic Business Schools by Fostering Students' Learning Style Versatility as a Key Learning Outcome – Empirical Evidence from India

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Abstract

Business environments are becoming increasingly challenging. Disruptions, permacrisis, AI-related revolutions, deglobalization, supply chain shocks, and further adversity drivers render it increasingly difficult for graduates of business schools and their organisations to succeed. Learning abilities in general and learning style versatility are proposed as a crucial coping mechanism. Learning style versatility refers to the ability to learn effectively relying on multiple modes. Adopting a qualitative research design, this study explored the qualitative aspects of how students view on learning style versatility and its development. Two primary drivers of dynamics emerged from 17 in-depth interviews. Classroom environments matter, especially their degree of functionality. In addition, the involved actors, including students and further supporters of the learning journeys, make a difference. Students either adopt a rather fatalistic or transformational stance towards learning opportunities. Further individuals complementing the learning equally show diverging degrees of supportiveness. This study proposes the first grounded theory on how learning style versatility emerges. Gained insights can inspire improvements in learning in business schools and beyond.

Keywords: learning style versatility, business school, humanism in business, grounded theory

1. Introduction

Today's business environments are marked by unprecedented complexity. Ongoing disruptions, permacrisis, the rise of artificial intelligence, deglobalization, and supply chain volatility shape them. These forces pose significant challenges not only for organizations but also for the graduates of business schools striving to navigate them. In light of such challenging business environments, many publications questioned the value of business schools. They would hardly walk the talk as posited by Martín and McGowan (2023). Consequently, Parker (2017) even calls for a shutdown of business schools. The research presented in this article takes on a more constructive approach and inquires how we might create and ensure more value.

If business environments become more challenging, honing learning skills can represent an interesting way forward. More precisely, further inquiry aspires to substantiate the importance of learning style versatility (LSV) with qualitative insights. This LSV addresses how an individual learns by deploying more than one learning style and mode effectively. The main research question inquires how students perceive the phenomenon of LSV. The research objective is to gain richer insight into the contextual factors, the dynamics at work, and the preconditions and barriers to students in a particular setting perceiving and responding to the LSV concept. Targeted insights could help towards establishing Humanistic Business Schools (HUBS), which are defined as a new breed of business schools in which different ideas, values, and outcomes are prioritized (Amann et al., 2011). The main difference is the focus on fostering the big D for dignity versus the big P for performance as fundamental learning targets and outcomes. Moving beyond efficiency and effectiveness as a functionalist logic, business schools should foster human dignity on the content level and when it comes to preparing students for the future. Suppose graduates can join the corporate world or the public sector and foster human dignity in their workplaces, and thus in society. In that case, business schools have more and a better impact.

2. Literature Review

2.1 On Learning Taxonomies

When reviewing the literature, the content of learning taxonomies needs clarification. Over the past 65 years, ever since Bloom's (1956) seminal work, several learning taxonomies have been suggested. Some authors have revised their ideas. Other authors have adjusted the taxonomies of earlier scholars. Table 1 provides an initial overview of learning taxonomies, giving a variety of classifications of which field to develop in the learning process.

Table 1. Timeline of Selected Educational Taxonomies

Year	Title	Features
1956	Bloom's taxonomy	Cognitive, affective and psychomotor
1979	Experiential taxonomy	Exposure, participation, identification, internalisation, dissemination
1982	SOLO (Structure of Observed Learning Outcomes) taxonomy	Pre-structural, uni-structural, multi-structural, relational, extended abstract
1989	Mc Cormack and Yager's taxonomy	Knowledge, process, creativity, application, attitude
1990	Revised Bloom's taxonomy	Remembering, understanding, applying, analysing, evaluating, creating
2000	Marzano's new taxonomy	Knowledge, cognitive system, metacognitive system, self-system
2001	Anderson et al.'s taxonomy	Factual, conceptual, procedural, and metacognitive knowledge
2003	Fink's taxonomy	Foundational knowledge, application, integration, human dimension, caring, learning how to learn
2007	Bloom's digital taxonomy	Remembering, understanding, applying, analysing, evaluating, creating
2017	Viji and Benedict's taxonomy	Emphasizing 21st century learning skills, ingenuity, connectedness and a local context

Source: Extending Viji and Benedict (2017a, p. 193)

Early on, Bloom (1956) distinguished between learning on cognitive, affective, and psychomotor levels to illustrate the taxonomy's development. Cognitively, he suggests learners ought to embrace knowledge, a deeper comprehension, and abilities to apply, analyse, synthesise, and evaluate new knowledge. Regarding affective learning, the taxonomy is once again ordered, structuring these aspects of learning from simple to complex feelings, including attitudes associated with receiving, responding to, valuing, organising, and characterising new knowledge.

Finally, regarding the psychomotor dimensions of learning, Bloom (1956) identifies reflex movements, fundamental movements, perceptual abilities, physical abilities, skilled movements, and non-discursive communication. Bloom's (1956) framework has long been considered seminal, with a significant impact on educational philosophies and curricula worldwide (Rahman & Manaf, 2017). It has also been criticised, e.g. by Case (2013), who sees downsides due to how easily people apply Bloom's framework badly, which then withholds learners from thinking beyond a given sequence of steps. As Viji and Benedict (2017a) show in their review (see the table above), several additional taxonomies emerged over the years, each with either more incremental or radical, far-reaching changes.

One of the shifts that took place over time is towards a focus on learning to learn. Fink (2003) presents a less hierarchical taxonomy, positing learning to learn as an explicit sixth category alongside foundational knowledge, application, integration, human dimensions, and caring. Anderson et al. (2001) emphasize adding the metacognitive level in their revision. Figure 8 in

section 4.3 above already provided an overview of the multiple links and relationships between LSV and metacognition. Marzano (2000) reaches beyond classic learning style taxonomy dimensions by suggesting a drastically different model for thinking and learning, and moving beyond elements established in past models. In a critical review of the model, Intel (2012) outlines that there is a foundational knowledge domain which includes information and mental and physical procedures when it comes to learning. The model then distinguishes three systems with a clear hierarchy of importance. The most vital system, identified as the self-system, focuses on (1) beliefs about how necessary knowledge or learning is, (2) beliefs regarding efficacy, and (3) knowledge-related emotions. On the level below, the second metacognition system is the "mission control" (p. 3), which specifies learning goals and monitors the execution of knowledge, clarity and accuracy. The third cognitive system considers knowledge retrieval, comprehension, analysis, and utilisation.

More recently, Viji and Benedict (2017b) have proposed a new learning taxonomy, their so-called taxonomy of ingenuity and connectedness (TIC), with 21st-century learners in mind. These learners have easy access to information, and the new taxonomy should catalyse a drastic innovation of the educational context in India. The authors also indicate that India shows strong connectedness. The more other countries and learners increase their level of connectedness, the more this taxonomy of the future will also apply to them. In sum, a more modern approach to learning taxonomies reflects many features: technological advancement, learners' (online) behaviour, learning needs that emphasize information search capabilities, the ability to create new insight, enhance creativity, and hone investigative imagination. Such approaches are more just-in-time, virtual, and less confined to teacher-driven, physical classroom activities. Wider connectedness in a modern context will be an essential element when reviewing the students' learning experience in this study.

2.2 Constancy versus Changeability of Learning Styles, Metacognition and Self-Regulation

Business environments for graduates of business schools have often been described as increasingly volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous – or VUCA – as has been detailed by Betof et al. (2014), Codreanu (2016), and Fassinger et al., (2017). In a VUCA, LSV could emerge as one of the most essential coping mechanisms, adopting a requisite variety view (Ashby, 2011). It is then crucial to know whether LSV is a changeable or constant trait. As LSV is still nascent as a concept, it is crucial to review the literature on growth potential and changes in learning preferences.

Regarding the quiddity of learning styles, Claxton and Ralston (1978) emphasize that a person's learning style should be defined as something constant. This could be explained considering the year of publication of their research, because, as outlined below, more insight on the constancy or changeability of learning styles emerged only later. But even the later publication of Willingham et al. (2015) reiterates this idea of learning style constancy, which is often understood as (1) "a consistent attribute of an individual" (p. 266), and (2) an attribute which is "constant across situations" (p. 266). Recognizing, roughly, that different people could learn the same content or skills in different ways, was accompanied by an interpretation that I label the structuring argument in favour of the constancy of learning

styles. The analysis of learning styles has to start somewhere, and viewing learning styles as fixed and exogenous allows for a better understanding of impact and context. The question that emerges asks which factors amplify complexity in this discussion on the changeability of learning styles.

Firstly, the poor delineation of constructs is one factor. Willingham et al. (2015) further explain constancy by distinguishing between styles and abilities. For these authors, learning styles address how a person carries out a task, while abilities focus on how well the task is done. They rely on a sports analogy. "Two basketball players may have equivalent ability but different styles on the court. One may take risks, whereas the other plays a conservative game" (Willingham et al., 2015, p. 267). I regard this as a good illustration of the structuring argument. Keeping styles and abilities separate as two fixed entities for the analysis allows for juxtapositions and analysis of relationships between constructs.

The second factor that shows the complexity of changeability is linked to definitions and the multidimensionality of the construct. Here we ask whether learning styles mirror preferences or abilities. Are they related to absorption or processing or both, as postulated in the Honey and Mumford (2009) framework? We know little about the impact of varying strengths of the preference and/or ability. Seiler (2011) differentiates three levels of preferences – strong, moderate and mild – while Honey and Mumford (2009) rate LSV on a scale from very low, through low, moderate, and strong, to very strong. The impact of intensity remains unknown, mainly because it is not discussed in the learning style literature. This research gap in the literature could reinforce the structuring argument. Until research can disclose more about different learning style attributes, the facets that are known to us, are likely to be treated as constant.

Thirdly, there is a pragmatic review of the perception and processing continuum framework of Kolb's (2006) learning cycle and the linked learning style framework Honey and Mumford (2009) proposed. Convergers differ from assimilators, which in turn vary from accommodating to being divergent. Suppose these learning styles are linked to another construct in the field of learning, namely, wisdom. In that case, the following argument relies on Clayton and Birren (1980), who understand wisdom as an outcome of maturation and an adult learning process, resulting in the capacity to understand open or covert truths. Wisdom could sometimes require divergent thinking styles, possibly also accommodation to dispose of theories that do not fit the intuition of a diverger, or the purely analytical skill of a converger. Nonaka and Toyama's (2007) definition of practical wisdom includes the ability to make judgments and to grasp the essence of situations.

Learning situations are often difficult (Maguire, 1997); thus, they require multiple learning styles for students to cope with them adequately. Hawes (2004) outlines how wisdom can be fostered with the help of the right teaching methods, e.g. case studies. Ergo, with wisdom training, the skill side of learning style shows it is not just given but can be shaped. Adler et al. (2004) in one of the rare examples of learning style related studies in business schools, precisely show that teacher-led and student-led cases impact on and balance out learning styles, or put differently, they alter LSV. Beyond this higher-level analysis and argument on

the quiddity of learning styles, one could narrow down attention to each learning style to an argument against constancy. For example, regarding the ability to create theoretical models and reason inductively, assimilators excel at generating theoretical frameworks and reasoning in an inductive way. Nagel et al. (2015) encourage researchers to seek mentoring and training to hone their research skills. Researchers are in a situation where abilities are not fatalistically constant. Researchers can learn to be more assimilative. Table 2 summarises this logic, and labels this interpretation as the wisdom-as-trigger-for-change argument.

Table 2. Opposing Schools of Thoughts in the Learning Style Literature and Their Implications for LSV

Feature	School of thought no. 1 on constancy	School of thought no. 2 on changeability
Key positions	▪ **The structuring argument**: Learning is constant (Claxton & Ralston, 1978), learning styles are a consistent attribute, and are constant regardless of the situation (Willingham et al., 2015). ▪ **The born-into-not-made argument**: Both the genetic and social setting into which people are born, impacts their learning styles (Dunn, 1996).	▪ **The non-immunity-to-change argument**: Both the broader adult learning field (e.g. Kegan, 1994) and the narrower learning style field (Dunn & Griggs, 1995) posit non-constancy and change dynamics at work. ▪ **The stimulus-response argument:** Practical learning to complement scholastic studies, is organised (Van den Berg, 2015), as is mere awareness training (Bhagat et al., 2015), and case-based training (Adler et al., 2004), all of which can foster a growth mind-set, and technological innovations impact learning styles. ▪ **The past-cum-future argument:** Not only past learning interventions, but also future career aspirations impact learning styles, and their perpetuation (Van den Berg, 2015). ▪ **The naturally fading argument:** Previous experiences do not necessarily have a lasting impact (Van den Berg, 2015). ▪ **The wisdom-as-trigger-for-change argument:** Wisdom can be fostered, thereby implying growth of different

		learning styles (Hawes, 2004).
Implications for LSV	There is no discretion, nor room to grow, in a rather fatalistic view of learning styles as a stable factor.	There are several means to change through diverse methods (e.g. case writing or practical work). Change can even occur after a short-term experience.
Implications for LSV as an emerging field	The literature remains divided on conceptual foundations and how learning styles persist or evolve. "Developing the flexibility to respond productively to all sorts of instructional situations would be a laudable goal… How best to encourage this flexibility is yet to be determined" (Bhagat et al., 2015, p. 59).	

Fourthly, the field of learning styles seems still to be in an early stage. Few attempts have turned learning styles from an exogenous to an endogenous variable. Seeing a variable as simultaneously both of these, inarguably, renders it more complex to characterise in detail. Dunn (1996) sees learning styles primarily as biologically imposed in this context. Parents could have contrasting learning styles, siblings can learn differently, and children generally can also vary in their learning styles. This could be labelled the born-into-not-made argument. While the classic debate in leadership development on innate versus cultivated leaders focuses on genetic dispositions, Dunn's (1996) study considers the interpretation that it is not only DNA, but also the social setting, which is largely fixed. Therefore, the innate versus cultivated argument relates mainly to being born into a bio-social setting and represents a somewhat fatalistic view of constancy.

A fifth factor that the literature mentions that impacts LSV is age or time. Abilities theory has long established that cognitive abilities are not constant, although the development of ability is not one-directional, as Salthouse (2010) indicated. Key abilities such as reasoning, processing speed, or memory grow from childhood to adulthood, while they decrease again as people age. Research now even embraces the idea that learning disabilities are remediable (Robinson, 2012). This is in line with other modern adult learning theories, such as Kegan and Lahey's (2009) theory, which assumes the human adult brain can reach higher levels over time, albeit not without effort and by no means in all cases. The authors outline both a certain 'immunity for change' and a non-fatalistic view of how to overcome Kegan's (1994) conceptually and empirically advanced Constructive Developmental Theory (CDT) as they foresee precisely this opportunity for learners to mature and elevate their thought processes, which are dynamic over time.

Dunn and Griggs (1995) believe an individual's learning styles can change over time. Seiler (2011), however, could not substantiate that learning styles change with age. More empirical evidence is needed. Hence, constancy within the narrower field of learning styles or the broader fields of adult learning, and even the theory of the mind, is not necessarily assumed to hold universally and fatalistically. In this regard, conceptual efforts need to be perpetuated because many constructs are not clearly delineated. If learning style research selectively

emphasizes ways of processing new input and differentiates more effective ways to process, especially when the meshing hypothesis is in place, then there is an overlap with the speed factor. This would put ‘time’ on the abilities side.

While not explicitly underlined, and in contrast to learning style definitions that presume constancy, there is an element of the variable that can entail change. This line of thought, which connects adult learning to more or less naturally occurring changes in thought processes, could be labelled the non-immunity-to-change argument, which positions it within the semantic world opened up by Kegan and Lahey (2009).

Van den Berg’s (2015) research relates to the speed factor. The table below summarises the development of his ideas as the stimulus-response argument, a naturally fading argument, and the past-cum-future argument. He found that even short periods of a specific activity can change learning styles. For example, medical students, when shifting from their academic work to their internships, thus from theoretical to practical training, showed three effects: (1) practical training alters learning styles even after shorter periods, producing more reflective and theoretically aware learners, applying the Honey and Mumford (2009) learning style framework; (2) past experiences impact learning styles by generating more action-oriented ways of thinking at the beginning of the clerkships (although this effect was not a long-lasting one); and (3) future career choice (different to past or present experiences) also impact learning styles, and the frequency with which abstract learners became pragmatists.

There are two further elements which can be subsumed under the stimulus-response argument. Darlo Digital (2018) interprets the work of Dweck (2015) on the growth mindset rather freely while transferring it to the concrete context of learning styles. The logic put forward is that, as a psychological concept, a growth mind-set could alter a learner’s perception of what they are capable of, and what new ways they should absorb in processing information they aspire to access. Altering learning styles would yield new learning abilities to better cope with an ever-challenging world. Bhagat et al. (2015) further underline the importance of the content being taught. These authors indicate that mere awareness of learning styles can impact the learning styles people adopt and display. Six consecutive sessions of at most one hour long showed not only an impact on self-awareness, but also portrayed, measurable (at statistically significant levels) changes in learning styles applied. The authors do not elaborate more extensively on the precise timeframe that elapsed between the sessions, nor on the study's overall start and end dates; however, based on their overall research report, the changes they report were most probably immediate.

Van den Berg (2015) reports on roughly two years of medical training, in which learning style changes occur. In contrast, Siriopoulos and Pomonis (2007) report on changes in learning styles within one year. This has implications for return on investment discussions in business schools and giving space and weight to learning-to-learn elements in curricula. As Kirby (1988) and Pask (1988) mention, the most effective learning style could be the one that does not depend on just one style or style-based consistency in one’s approach, i.e. the authors argue in favour of LSV.

Darlo Digital (2018) similarly interprets Reid's (n.d.) research that suggests even if learning styles do not change fundamentally, we are likely to see adaptations through technology use in the learning process. Both of these points have implications for curriculum design, where decisions are made on the content and delivery mode of learning experiences. Learning goals that include a growth mind-set and technology are thus antecedents of learning styles, and as adaptations are explicitly mentioned, possibly also of LSV.

Table 2 summarises these insights. Interpreted from a curriculum design point of view, providing students with opportunities for practical terms in which they encounter a range of learning stimuli could help them evolve. I have labelled this the stimulus-response argument. Preferences with which learners start do not seem to last when other learning opportunities arise. I have labelled this the naturally fading argument. Finally, as past and future learning experiences impact learning styles, they seem to get shaped by elements of both time dimensions, therefore the label past-cum-future argument.

The table above gives a preliminary summary of the field of learning styles, starting with the assumption of constancy. Yet revisiting the different definitions, their scope, and how they link to other learning constructs, such as practical wisdom as a learning outcome, raises a question regarding constancy and thus brings doubt regarding a fatalist perspective on individuals' learning styles in an increasingly VUCA world.

Following from this, the literature on learning styles can be divided into two opinion camps, one that advocates a constancy perspective, and one that is open to more discretion, options and choices. Constancy, however, entails an assumption which cannot be sustained if the definitions are scrutinised and links to other constructs are considered.

Still, from this constancy-versus-changeability perspective, sound knowledge about learning styles is scant. The foundations do not allow extensive inferences regarding LSV. There is a research gap in general, as well as in business school related studies. The research cited above largely takes place outside of business schools, while medical schools have done substantially more in researching students' learning styles. Bhagat et al. (2015), therefore, summarise the state of the field quite aptly as follows: "developing the flexibility to respond productively to all sorts of instructional situations would be a laudable goal… How best to encourage this flexibility is yet to be determined" (p.59).

2.3 Insights from Leadership Development on Boosting Versatility

The literature review section in chapter 2 drew a parallel between the overall level of maturity of the fields of leadership and learning styles. The argument then was that studies on leadership had progressed beyond a first stage that predominantly emphasises definitions, and even beyond a second stage, which focuses on leadership styles. Within the field of leadership, it remains essential to understand and have clarity on what leadership is and which styles exist. Yet, as Kaplan and Kaiser (2003) empirically substantiate, leadership versatility emerges as the most crucial leadership skill because a versatile leader could most likely cope with it no matter what the situation demands. Continuing the parallel, figure 1

below illustrates one comparative view on the leadership field versus the field of learning and learning styles.

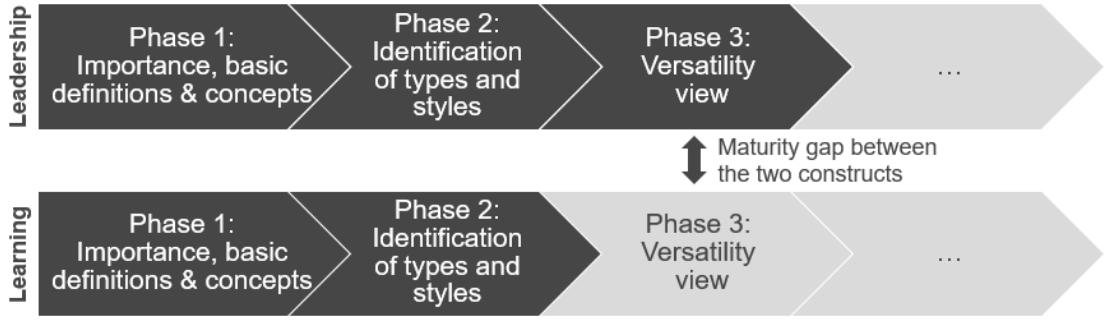

Figure 1. Comparison of Developmental Phases in Leadership Versatility Research versus LSV Research

This representation shows that LSV represents a potential next step in maturing the learning style field. The table below summarises this development along with sample publications. Various learning styles have been defined and juxtaposed, and the field is rich in different approaches, as exemplified in the 71 conceptualisations included in the review by Coffield et al. (2004). However, to the best of my knowledge, none of the articles in the literature move beyond the dominant questions regarding the best typologies, the soundest theoretical foundation, the best measure, and how to apply the concept of 'learning style' (for example, Romanelli et al., 2009).

Table 3. The Development of the Leadership and Learning Style Field

Stages in the concept's maturity over time	Leadership field – Sample publications	Learning style field – Sample publications
1st stage: Defining the construct and clarifying its essentiality	Scordato (2015), Connor (2002)	Cassidy (2010), Zajac (2009)
2nd stage: Acknowledging different styles	Weiss et al. (2018), Zhang et al. (2018).	Stander et al. (2019), Keefe (1985), Ahmadaliev et al. (2018).
3rd stage: Emphasizing and fostering versatility	Uhl-Bien and Marion (2008), Robinson (2016), Kaplan and Kaiser (2003a, b).	Gap

The contingency theory view (Donaldson, 2001) posits that no single best styles exist. Instead, it is a question of fit. The three empirical studies presented in chapters 2, 4 and 6 delineate a field of tension with the VUCA world, which increasingly challenges leaders and managers (Betof et al., 2014; Codreanu, 2016; Fassinger et al., 2017).

The response to this growing adversity can be found in re-establishing fit by educating, recruiting, promoting and retaining the right talents in the student body of business schools. Leadership must be situationally appropriate to be effective (Thompson & Vecchio, 2009). For Robinson (2016), leadership and learning have been too far apart. Hodgson and White (2001) propose a learning model of leadership for uncertain environments, reframing leaders as learners. Sticking to one style or past strengths could have detrimental effects. Kaplan and Kaiser (2003a) argue similarly, and with a massive dataset, give evidence on how much more effective versatile leaders are.

Research into learning styles has not achieved the same level of maturation as research into leadership. Learning style research still lacks the insight that neither understanding a style and its theory (Cassidy, 2010; Zajac, 2009), nor differentiating styles as in, for example, Stander et al. (2019), Keefe (1985), or Ahmadaliev et al. (2018) are sufficient. LSV needs to be prioritised in business school research.

According to Butler (2008), a 1959 Carnegie Foundation report and a Ford Foundation report introduced a strong rift, the so-called 'valley of death', between rigorous research and practical relevance. Both reports criticised business school research as insufficiently theoretically rigorous, calling for integrating natural sciences' approaches and tools.

The divide that emerged as a consequence continues to be a challenge (De Frutos-Belizón et al., 2018). The phenomenon has been a theme of discussion in numerous top journals, such as the Academy of Management Journal (2001), the British Journal of Management (2001), Human Resources Management (2004), the Journal of Management Studies (2009), Organization Studies (2010), the Academy of Management Perspectives (2012), and the Journal of Business Economics (2014). Research in business schools should overcome this rift by triggering more research on how to create more versatile learners in the business context.

Thus, we need to reflect on what insights the development of leadership versatility might inspire, or what could spill over into the field of learning styles. Similar to leadership style, learning style has a cognitive and a behavioural component and similarly has to address a foundational question of whether the skills are innate or socially developed. As it is, leadership development represents a core field within executive education and business schools, which also raises questions on a similar place for learning style and strategy development. The following section provides a literature review in the form of a brief overview, which serves merely the purpose of identifying topics that will help sensitise readers for the field work of study 3.

Two more contemporary areas within the literature on leadership development appear relevant for this research. The first is the aforementioned area of leadership versatility, as outlined by Kaplan and Kaiser (2003a) and Goleman (1998), which refers to superior performance in outcomes such as productivity or engagement at organisational, unit, or team levels. The second is an area captured by strategic leadership, identified as "blue ocean leadership" (Kim & Mauborgne, 2014).

The following analysis focuses on these more modern approaches, fully acknowledging, though, that contingency theories have decades of publications on the effectiveness of leadership depending on circumstances, thus being very situational. Early work includes the model on situational leadership by Hersey et al. (1969), or Vroom and Yetton's (1973) tool in the form of decision-making trees to account for situational idiosyncrasies. Beyond leadership, and referring to more general strategies and skills, Donaldson (2001) describes how, considering there is no perfect setup, entire organisations ought to pursue "fit", because organisational achievement relies mainly on the fit and alignment of internal and external factors. More recent approaches, however, adopt very modern views as outlined below, introducing emotional intelligence, the sophisticated measurement tools of a leadership versatility index, or strategic thinking to their reflection on leadership.

Kaplan and Kaiser (2003a) propose a similar contingency framework as Goleman (1998) when the latter presents six leadership styles, the results of which are determined by what is situationally needed. The only important conceptual difference is that Goleman (2000) adds the perspective of emotional intelligence as "the ability to manage ourselves and our relationships effectively" (p.6) when addressing versatility.

Kaplan and Kaiser's (2003a) model spans a 2x2 matrix focusing on forceful versus enabling and strategic versus operational style. Regarding the level of reductionism and as a duality-oriented framework, it is comparable to Honey and Mumford's (2009) framework. Another possible contribution to learning styles and LSV is a new set of semantics, i.e. new terminologies, such as lop-sidedness, hypertrophy (describing an overdevelopment of one side of leadership), or atrophy (pointing to the negligence of another). Kaplan and Kaiser (2003a) also point to mental models skewed by the need to explore basic assumptions, beliefs, values, attitudes and behaviours. The discussion of leadership style is often reduced to preferences and behaviours.

Kaplan and Kaiser (2003a) suggest ways to gain more versatility in leadership. They propose that working on self-awareness as an out-of-balance leadership approach or style emanates from an ill-fitting belief system, similar to the contingency view for LSV. Further, according to these authors, the emotional side and awareness of various possibilities represent the start of developing one's leadership versatility.

The measurement tool they provide helps elevate this process of self-awareness to one that is not only idea-based but also data-driven. Interestingly, Bhagat et al.'s (2015) research on learning styles similarly points to the importance and impact of awareness. Dunn (1996) links these tools to holistic learning style programmes, illustrating many tools to measure learning styles. In the same way, Kaplan and Kaiser (2003a) mention the importance of looking ahead to recognise particular jobs' requirements. This parallels Van den Berg's (2015) insistence on linking learning styles and their persistence to career objectives.

Here, the leadership field might already be more developed than the learning style field, as there are several clear models of so-called leadership pipelines (e.g. Charan et al., 2011). They clearly outline the expectations per leadership level from the early pre-leadership level of being a team member to senior corporate and multi-business unit executive levels.

Kaplan and Kaiser (2003a) continue by outlining a third element of honing versatility in addressing and conquering fear while overcoming weaknesses. Nevertheless, they do not share specific steps to take beyond self-awareness. Finally, they encourage individuals, even while remaining somewhat vague, "to do some internal work" (Kaplan & Kaiser, 2003a, p. 25). They apply the analogy of developing muscle growth through training to prevent atrophy, thus being overdeveloped to the hypertrophy stage, while undertraining other areas. Thus, they hint at the need to adjust certain practices and to learn to emphasize differently. Their final suggestion for working towards more versatility is to avoid binary thinking, as in altogether discontinuing one line of action in response to feedback that the action was done too energetically, or in aggressively overdoing an action due to input that a bit more was required. Otherwise, Kaplan and Kaiser (2003b), mention no additional step other than working towards a personalised development plan.

Goleman (1998) remains similarly vague regarding specifying how to implement the four core emotional intelligence capabilities, which have been broken down to 20 competencies to implement the six leadership styles better situationally. Goleman (1998) recommends starting the journey towards more leadership versatility with self-awareness and recognition of lacking EQ competencies, followed by a commitment to "work assiduously" (p.14) and practice.

An additional coping strategy would be assembling a team with skill sets complementing one another, rather than trying to develop individuals towards higher leadership versatility. Identical to Kaplan and Kaiser (2003a, 2003b), Goleman (1998) adopts elements of a growth mind-set and changeability by suggesting that, in contrast to the largely genetics-based and relatively stable IQ, EQ is seemingly learnable "at any age" (p. 15).

A third, recent innovation in leadership development is positioned very differently, with parallels to discussions within the learning style field. Kim and Mauborgne (2014) argue that leadership must be reframed while transferring insights from strategic management. It should abandon the heavy trait or preference orientation, which might either be more difficult or more time-consuming in enhancing leadership versatility, and with versatility, would not even be necessary. They further argue that being more versatile and practical should not take extra time.

Their blue ocean leadership strategy foresees orienting leadership efforts towards all those not yet fully following the leaders. In some countries, over 80-90% of staff members are disengaged from leadership. Versatility can overcome this pitfall. The authors recommend four steps as we advance: (1) leaders should openly face their leadership reality, starting with more self-awareness and taking stock, ideally with external feedback; (2) they should canvas alternative leadership profiles compared to existing behaviours. This once again should entail external feedback to inquire what should be reduced slightly, what should be somewhat increased, what should be entirely added to the leadership repertoire, and what should be erased from the leadership behaviours; (3) there should be a negotiation and 'selling' process to stakeholders, before (4) the new leadership behaviour is institutionalised building the corresponding routines.

The most significant insights to be gained from blue ocean leadership are, once again, a focus on the proper dosage, the fundamental belief in changeability and thus a non-fatalistic view, and most importantly, the encouragement to ignore predispositions or preferences. If it is to become more effective and versatile, leadership could feel somewhat uncomfortable. Progress can be made by institutionalising and through routines, thus by practices similar to what Goleman (1998) suggests.

In the context of learning styles, Dunn (1996) points to the insight that learning can take place even via a style commonly thought to be unsuitable, very much in line with blue ocean leadership thinking. The possibility that the dual nature of learning style could be understood as both preference and absorption ability would emphasize it as a processing skill.

2.4 Summary of Research Gaps and Sensitising Topics

The preliminary literature review, which aimed at sensitising readers to emerging topics, had three sections. The first section concluded that modern learning taxonomies embrace different levels of learning. LSV represents a part of this view, thereby exceeding the more classic knowledge orientation for which the Bloom (1956) taxonomy became famous.

The second section of this preliminary literature review dealt with the two opinion camps and arguments abstracted from the literature. As outlined in Table 2, the first opinion camp adheres to the structuring argument and the born-into-not-made argument, which both emphasise the view that learning styles are given and, therefore, more constant. The second opinion camp adheres to the non-immunity-to-change argument, the stimulus-response argument, the past-cum-future argument, and the wisdom-as-trigger-for-change argument, which in turn, all speak in favour of a non-fatalistic view on learning style. There are initial implications for LSV, but overall, the level of the available insights does not reflect substantial maturity. This seems to have advanced more in research in other settings than in business schools. The overall body of knowledge can best be described by researchers active in the field itself: “Developing the flexibility to respond productively to all sorts of instructional situations would be a laudable goal… How best to encourage this flexibility is yet to be determined” (Bhagat et al., 2015, p.59).

The third section of this preliminary literature review explained the strong parallels to the field of versatility development in leadership. The leadership field inspired this research project’s questions regarding LSV in the first place. Leadership versatility has given some additional insights on developing versatility in the field of learning styles, yet there are also limitations. Rolfe et al. (2001) provide a useful set of questions to solve problems, asking, What? So What? Now what? These questions can also be used in critically reviewing literature, in this case the selected readings on leadership versatility. Models seem to be biased content-wise to the initial, more descriptive content, putting less emphasis on the prescriptive part dealing with how actually to implement versatility development. The ensuing grounded theory study explores this build-up of versatility based on students’ perceptions. The exact way in which the research question is addressed will be outlined in the next section.

3. Methodology

Grounded theory is one of qualitative analysis's most critical and influential approaches (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Starks and Trinidad (2007) recommend grounded theory as the perfect fit for research questions with the development of an explanatory theory as their goal and with the target of exploring how a chosen social process takes place in a specific environment. This empirical study investigates how students, as a key stakeholder group in learning, experience the dynamics related to LSV. Addressing this research question with grounded theory represents a match – it is a functional fit. Charmaz (2016), constructivist grounded theory distances itself from a positivist epistemology. Especially with relatively new and complex topics, such as LSV, I share the assumptions Charmaz (2016) posits. As the researcher, I participate in the sense-making and drive the development of a new context-specific substantive theory grounded in data and based on the co-created meaning. The grounded theorising process is unlikely to yield the same results if carried out by other researchers. I bring certain assumptions to the analysis about the involved disciplines (education and business schools, research, etc.) and theoretical perspectives. Suppose epistemology comprises the truths, beliefs and justifications (Steup & Neta, 2020) regarding key themes. In that case, my epistemology builds on the beliefs that business schools ought to be role models, committed to continuous improvement to contribute to earning the right to educate, operate in an economically sound but highly responsible way or that leadership in business schools should be just as efficient and effective as in non-academic corporations. This sets high expectations.

Other researchers would not have read the same literature or carried out the same quantitative or qualitative studies on the topic as I have. Their interests might differ to mine, and they would not have identical access to this unique study context at the research partner institution in India to pragmatically create an idiosyncratic study as part of their quest to improve the situation and prepare for their own careers and publication strategies.

3.1 Target Group Selection and Interview Process

In order to ensure contextual consistency across interviewees, a private business school in Bengaluru served as a research partner and source of students for the interviewees. Interviews represent a significant method for data collection in grounded theory (Thompson, 2011).

To assist, the partner institution's dean tasked the associate dean of research to support the selection of interviewee candidates. Here, Blaxter et al.'s (2006) statement that "research is the art of the feasible" (p. 157) can be observed in action. Before I travelled to India, an email was sent to all students, announcing and explaining the study and sharing the information sheet, plus the consent forms. A town hall meeting with all students presented the project and allowed for questions, also for distributing the information sheet and the consent form a second time. The researcher reiterated that participation was voluntary and that data would only be analysed anonymously on an aggregated level. The positive atmosphere with general questions indicated that, as much as this seemed possible, I had managed to minimise fears or any perceived pressure to participate. The associate dean went to all classrooms on consecutive days, selecting a handful of students from undergraduate and graduate courses,

so that all classes and business subjects were represented. Interviewees were 60% male and 40% female.

In grounded theory studies, the exact number of interviewees is not defined *ex ante*. Sufficiency versus saturation guided the process of adding further interviews. Established sampling techniques were therefore not applied, i.e. an *ex ante* set probability sampling ensuring that participants have an equal chance to be interviewed as outlined by Etikan et al. (2015). These authors distinguish non-probability sampling in convenience or purposive sampling, encouraging researchers to describe how their sample could differ from random ones. According to these authors, convenience sampling relies on easier accessibility and availability. Purposive sampling chooses study participants based on specific, explicit and predefined qualities.

I conducted unstructured interviews following what Morse and Niehaus (2009) identify as an underlying trait of all grounded theories. Charmaz (2012) lists several reasons for using such interviews for constructivist grounded theory studies. For example, they ensure more control in collecting and analysing data than other approaches, most notably enabling ethnography as well as text analysis. Interviews for exploring the phenomenon of interest with open-ended questions assure much-needed flexibility in the research process to probe and pursue emerging themes when eliciting experiences.

While video-recording systems have several advantages, they have downsides, too, as set out by Nehls et al. (2015). Initially, students participating in this study were asked whether videotaping or sound recording the interviews would be acceptable. However, as none initially agreed, the attempt to capture the interviews digitally was abandoned. The participants did not explicitly share reasons for their refusal, which was also not required. Their hesitation might have been overcome later after building a trusting relationship with the researcher. They might have feared that recordings could be used in a way that would embarrass them, although the research ethics guidelines ensured this would not happen. Meetings in person overcame the technology problem, like videorecording, possibly failing due to the still limited technological endowment of the institution, even for a reliable WhatsApp or Zoom connection. Regarding the number of interviews to be recorded, there are two main criteria for the decision on cut-off: sufficiency and saturation (Charmaz, 2014). The chosen constructivist grounded theory foresaw these interviews being carried out until saturation as it reflects a more rigorous nature.

4. Empirical Results Producing the Grounded Theory of ‘Emergence’ for a Student-Oriented View on LSV

This section reports on the empirical results according to the key stages Charmaz (2012) suggests for future researchers to follow her published framework and the empirical results of their particular study. This allows us to cumulatively build up knowledge on grounded theory as more illustrative studies become available. The following sections, therefore, include stage 1 on coding, stage 2 on memo writing, stage 3 on theoretical sampling, and stage 4 on

integrating the analysis. These stages are not purely chronologically sequential. As mentioned, to capture perceptions and observations thoroughly, memo writing took place during the coding process, before and after the theoretical sampling, and even after stage 4. Ongoing memo writing was also aimed at fostering reflexivity and a more robust grounded theory.

Stage 1: Coding data

As Charmaz (2012) recommended, coding represents the first step in the analysis to move from mere description to conceptualisation. Coding was done line-by-line, paying close attention to the data. As suggested by the framework for the analysis, I was attentive to sensitising concepts I came across in frequent reflective moments. Initially, I did open coding, which entails first analytical decisions, and subsequently focused coding, which processes the most frequently used codes. This helped with sorting, synthesising, and conceptualising the data. As in study 2, this was done by using active language, specifically using gerunds. A search for more data on these processes was then pursued.

Charmaz (2012) alerts researchers to the possibility that new directions can emerge during the coding and subsequent interviews, thus taking the analysis beyond the initial scope and themes. This happened when a second group, a second cluster of students, seemed to be emerging. Further interviews revealed that particular features did not belong only to an initially small group of outliers that did not fit the first apparently homogeneous interviews and emerging insights. Selective or focused codes were, as suggested by Charmaz (2012), more incisive, general and abstract, while also serving a categorising role. They also reached beyond a single interview and enabled comparisons and fit assessment beyond a rudimentary framework for theorising and the actual situation in the data. Iteratively comparing recurring themes in interviews, doing the open coding on a very granular level, and coding and categorising labels on a more abstract, focused level across dozens of interviews took considerable time. The emerging categories provided the foundation for emerging frameworks.

The table below provides an overview of the coding process and emerging categories. It shares interviewee quotes that are coded and categorised according to elements of the student's ecosystem. What becomes apparent is a distinction between students who view their environment primarily as positive and full of opportunities and those who view it as deterministic and thus fatalistically negative.

Besides the environment's core role in the phenomenon of LSV, in terms of being conducive to fostering self-awareness, reflexivity, or experimentation, the student's role can be categorized as either more active or more passive.

One has to bear in mind that placing the term "category" or the categorisation process in a binary-style, in an in-versus-out list, does not necessarily do justice to the more fine-grained continuum on which students' responses could be placed. There are varying degrees to which they fulfil each category. Following the description of data coding, the following section explores memo writing as a crucial phase of analysing the data, codes and categories.

Table 4. Sample Coding and Emerging Categories in Student-External Factors

Interviewee	Comment	Code	Category
I1	"Technology is cool. I am on websites like YouTube to learn more about the topics."	Going beyond a professor's offer	Perceiving the environment as enabling
I2	"I browse, go beyond books."	Realising opportunities	
I3	"School is irrelevant… learning to learn is not discussed… they think learning is memorising."	Understanding the limitations of the institution	
I5	"Now we have maximum freedom. Some professors really give their best effort, whatever they can do. We take it forward."	Seeing the positive value	
I6	"I read, go on YouTube, try to experience, see what is working."	Experimenting	
I4	"In school, it is a last-minute rush; we learn for exams, which is not practical at all. I would rather do something practical."	Resigning to the status quo	Perceiving environment as limiting and negative
I7	"The class is useless."	Getting frustrated with the institution	
I8	"Classes don't work… I learn alone… Need to adapt as I love the job I have in mind."	Accommodating	
I9	"Here it is 70% dictation, 30% watching videos. If you are interested in learning, then what?	Seeing limitations surrounding the student	
I10	"There is no speaking about learning to learn in school, 80% of the class is lecturing. The professor does not tell us how to have a new idea."	Being stuck	
I11	"Here is competition, it is not good."	Seeing the non-enabling environment	
I17	"I watch YouTube, I cannot understand what the professor is saying. They sometimes just send the PowerPoint files without explanations."	Feeling let down by teachers	

Stage 2: Memo writing

Continuing to follow Charmaz's (2012) guidelines, memo writing is viewed as an interim step that links codes to initial drafts within a more coherent analysis. I wrote such memos during lunch or coffee breaks, at the end of each interview day, and in the morning before commencing the next round of interviews and after reflecting on the data. I continued memo

writing the days after returning from the research partner's location. Notes were written in a quick, shorthand way, sometimes even using dictation software before editing in word processing software to capture all pivotal thoughts. A total of 15 pages were accumulated due to this form of memo writing. Following Chandrasegaran et al.'s (2017) recommendation, visualisations drawn on paper and in PowerPoint frames complemented the dictations and compiled texts. They were essential to ensuring insights and emerging theory-related observations that originated from working solely with the data and not with literature in the first place.

Stage 3: Theoretical sampling

This stage explored additional cases for developing the categories. The purpose was to check for completeness of the categories, explore variations within them, and explore possible features shared between them. Regular, ongoing comparison can then lift concepts to the theoretical level. For this to happen, saturation is required (Charmaz, 2012).

Further interviews substantiated previous codes in the context of this study. Here are further illustrative excerpts of students' comments that colour the environment positively. The ecosystem referred to here goes beyond the classroom and includes technology.

- I40: "I like experiments, the few that we do, very much. I learn a lot. I leant that I learnt a lot from them. And now with Google, it is so easy. Technology really makes all the difference. If I don't get it from the class, I watch videos until I understand it."
- I50: "Practical work helps us best. Business law class had a few cases and a trip. Google helps with assignments. There are mentoring sessions and advisory. If there is a problem in class or family, they help. During orientation day, they gave us a value orientation as well, about being disciplined…"

At the same time, students' comments on the ecosystem being less enabling increased as more interviews were conducted. On being active and taking their initiative, rather than merely being stuck in a deterministic situation, students shared:

- I40: "Learning is my responsibility."
- I41: "Students need to adapt."
- I45: "How I learn best is up to me, I need to figure it out. I am doing it. It is totally dependent on our efforts. We have to work hard. We adapt."

In contrast, the quotes and codes of the students who took a more fatalistic and thus more passive stance were as follows:

- I42: "We do not have the power to change the schools. The programme is for the sake of certification, to get a job. Many of us still need to figure out what we want to do. At least with the certification we can get a job and figure it out then. We study to please the parents. A degree gives us safety, then they leave us alone. We might have wasted years then, but we go with the flow."

Making a preliminary summary of the theoretical sampling stage, it became apparent that there were recurring core themes in the evoked set and within the relevant set of topics frequently mentioned. The last three interviews brought no new information, which induced an obvious heard-it-all and understood-it-all moment, allowing me to realize that I had reached saturation – probing questions produced answers very much by known codes and categories. The final step, as outlined in the following section, was to be undertaken next: integrating the quotes, codes, categories, memos, insights and interpretations into one substantial theory and framework. The following section sheds light on this.

Stage 4: Integrating the analysis

This integration process relies on both categories (classroom environment and actors) emerging as concepts and on their rich analysis during memo writing. The memos brought clarity and a minimum degree of generalising in the emerging grounded theory, which can be understood as a story that unfolds (Charmaz, 2012). As shown in the figure below, this narrative is about an observed process. 'Emergence' is about how a student embraces both adversity and opportunity in a classroom environment, and about the potential additional complementary factors offered, such as technology and rich pools of information available for self-study, helping to hone LSV. Some students do so more quickly, some lag behind. This resulting grounded theory of emergence starts with two perceptions of the classroom environment in a narrower or broader sense. One group of students view the classroom environment as relatively rigid. They do as they are told. They comply with expectations and impose learning style boundaries.

Their counterparts, however, have broadened their horizons. They have turned their learning environment into a multi-site "classroom." Learning can take place within the actual, physical classroom, online on their mobiles, or online or offline at home. For the location boundaries are more fluid.

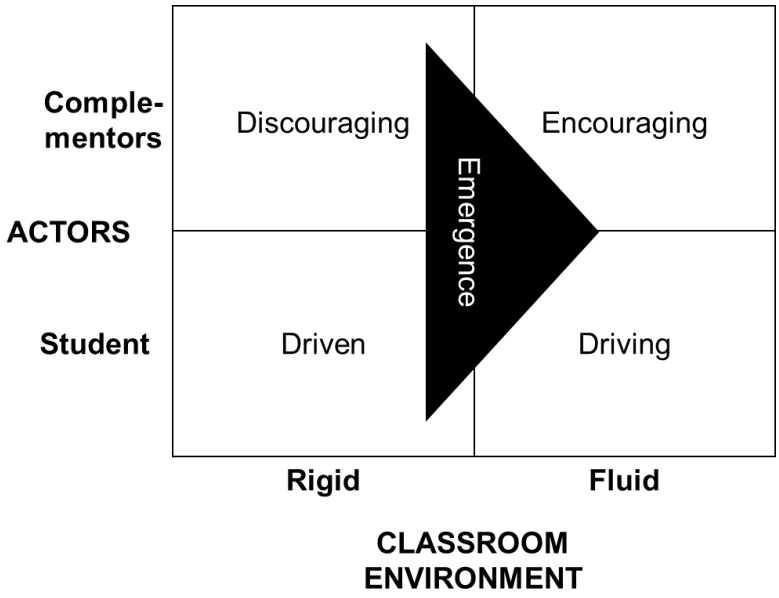

Figure 2. Emergence Framework as Grounded Theory for Student-Oriented LSV Dynamics

5. Interpretation and Discussion

Two drivers catalyse the efforts of the second group, namely adversity and additional opportunities. What emerges is insight into the tremendous flexibility of how, where and when to learn. Technology constitutes the central pillar that brings complementary tools into its ecosystem. In addition, a few, often younger, teachers inspire and encourage in an otherwise dull, mono-teaching style environment, which allows no LSV potential to prosper, let alone being discovered as part of honing higher order learning, e.g. on the metacognition level.

A central question eventually refers to how students perceive LSV. The data shows that it strongly depends on their perception of the classroom environment. We need to know whether it is as rigid as portrayed and whether such perceptions are driven by the faculty. If students adopt the view of a rigid classroom set up as the only possibility, they usually also embrace passivity. They neither show interest in diversifying their repertoire of learning styles nor see the need to enhance their LSV.

In contrast to passive participants, a larger group of students showed that they embrace a world view in which classroom boundaries and guardrails for learning are fluid. They are proactive and drive their learning journeys. They steer their development, taking responsibility for it. They experiment with different modes of learning. If they find the faculty not up to their standards, they move beyond and find out what works elsewhere. They embark on peer learning and take note of what others are doing. Intense competition for jobs, careers and social mobility, as well as unrealistically high family expectations of many in the Indian culture, accelerate them, driving their learning and skills. The adversity energizes learning, propels experimentation, and prevents individuals from getting too comfortable and convenience-oriented.

Besides adversity, there are other complements if the students embrace the resulting opportunities outlined below. Technological innovation, to some extent, assures that students can be less reliant on faculty members in their learning. If faculty do not share information on learning skills or explicitly on LSV, individuals can grow, even unconsciously, with the help of online learning offers. Online offers can include specialized learning apps, websites and platforms that are either free or proprietary, or mere Google searches and YouTube videos. They would not per se exclude the possibility for theorists to learn more traditionally from books, articles or notes, but they do encourage experimentation.

The notion of emergence fits in this kind of study for two reasons. On the one hand, it refers to something that moves from concealed to visible. According to study participants, what has been challenging to explore, experiment with, and hone, such as LSV, is now emerging as a new form of behaviour. Emergence refers not only to something concealed before becoming visible, but also to something coming into existence and even gaining prominence. Still at a largely unconscious level, learning to learn and becoming a more versatile learner emerges as a key to survival in the future job market, in the degree programmes and courses, as well as in participants' private social lives, e.g. with parents and other close relatives who impose performance pressure.

In addition, the notion of emergence refers to an ongoing process that has not been completed and has not reached all students. Finally, in light of the minimal focus on the learning-to-learn concept among faculty or the larger institutional side, further stages in the emergence process are likely to be seen. The more technology grows, and related behaviours spread, the likelier we will see an acceleration in adopting learning skills and the LSV view.

Finally, this research adds to the learning field in India's unique context. Taneja et al. (2023) present a study of Indian architecture students that investigates learning styles and their correlation with creativity. However, there is no link to LSV as a new perspective on learning styles in their work. The research at hand contributes to a holistic view on learning in the Indian cultural context, very much as called for by Das et al. (2024). Tripathi (2024) equally views learning as a crucial success factor, yet strongly emphasizes learning agility. Simultaneously, this research and article add to research presented by Panicker (2020), who points to barriers to teaching innovation while indicating more insights are needed on how to proceed. As a consequence, LSV strengthens its place within research on learning, pedagogy and andragogy in practice – in the Indian context and beyond, as contextual research should be replicated elsewhere. Simultaneously, this LSV-related research adds to the growing body of critical pedagogy in India, as called for by Babu and Naithani (2025).

6. Conclusion

This study investigated the qualitative aspects of how students view LSV. The construct is central as a value-creating learning outcome in humanistic and student-centred business schools. Two primary drivers of dynamics emerged from the in-depth interviews. Classroom environments could either be highly supportive or dysfunctional. The actors activate the second drivers. Students could adopt a more fatalistic view or act more transformationally. Further complementors can either hinder or promote LSV improvements. Therefore, a 2x2 matrix emerges, which calls for a more differentiated view on what matters when business schools aim at honing the LSV of their course participants. Future research is encouraged to generalize gained research insights beyond the setting of this qualitative study and the private business school in Bengaluru. Further quantitative insights from this study could further cement the importance of LSV and the identified four main scenarios based on the student view presented in this article.

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