

# Making Humanistic Business Schools Happen: Exploring the Faculty's View on Growing Learning Style Versatility of Program Participants



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**Abstract:** Business school graduates and their employers face the challenge of operating in ever more difficult markets. As business schools have been criticized for lacking relevance, one way to add more value is to hone the learning skills of program participants. The logic is that the better and faster they learn, the more effectively they will cope with the demanding programs as well as business challenges later on. Adopting a humanistic management lens, demands are even higher. Humanistic management fosters abilities to protect and enhance human dignity while building organizations with solid economic engines and valued offerings to the market. In turn, Humanistic Business Schools (HUBS) bring these two expectations together. They provide more value to their program participants by improving learning skills and teaching how to build solutions, taking better care of human dignity. This article presents new research on how faculty can contribute when honing the learning style versatility of program participants. Adopting a constructivist grounded theory based on in-depth interviews, the study suggests four levels of learning style maturity. Gained insights can help improve business schools as institutions and the impact graduates can have on their employers.

**Keywords:** business schools, humanistic management, humanism, learning styles, learning style versatility

## 1. Introduction

This study presents the cornerstones of a faculty-oriented grounded theory on understanding the factors explicitly and implicitly related to using learning style versatility (LSV) in a private business school that offers undergraduate and graduate programs in a major city in India. Why bother about one key driver for further change learning-related improvements? One key driver is that the United Nations Global Compact Principles of Responsible Management Education (PRME) initiative underlined the importance of ongoing improvements (Godemann et al., 2014). Institutions should be role model organizations themselves and, on an ongoing basis, improve how they adapt the ways they convey normative insights and skills for

doing business beyond a constrained shareholder value focus. In their concept of Humanistic Business Schools, Amann et al. (2011) clarified that focusing on human dignity represents a strong alternative to the shareholder maximization paradigm.

As such, this study is part of the debate on what business schools actually do themselves in response to major challenges and an ever-changing context, such as one characterized by ongoing system shocks, wars, pandemics, or deglobalization.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 LSV and related constructs

LSV refers to the degree to which an individual utilizes more than one learning style and mode effectively. This construct is clearly distinguishable and differentiated from several related constructs. Yet

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together, these constructs form the foundation of an integrated view on learning quotient (LQ) that captures the ability to learn effectively.

### 2.1.1 Absorptive capacity versus LSV

This line of thought that distinguishes potential from actually realized capacity to grow, evolve and transform is also inherent in the construct of ‘absorptive capacity’ (Zahra & George, 2002). Absorptive capacity adds a perspective that defines learning as a broad process, which moves beyond simply acquiring new knowledge and reconfiguring existing mind-sets, to transforming and exploiting the acquired knowledge by applying it effectively in order to gain an advantage in competitive settings.

### 2.1.2 Learning agility versus LSV

Another related concept, ‘learning agility’, refers to individuals who possess openness, willingness to learn, flexibility, curiosity, tolerance of ambiguity, people skills, vision and innovation (Eichinger & Lombardo, 2004). However, such a broad definition is less able to delineate what is included and what is excluded from the construct’s scope. Gravett and Caldwell (2016) add clarity by defining learning agility more narrowly as adaptability and willingness to confront the unknown. They identify four types of learning agility, namely mental agility, people agility, agility to change, and agility to achieve results. LSV complements these constructs. As per Rolfe and Cheek (2012), learning styles and LSV are thus based on the initial assumption that each learner has personal characteristics “that influence how that person learns” (p. 176). These authors find that adjusting teaching styles can improve learning outcomes.

### 2.1.3 Multiple intelligences versus LSV

In differentiating LSV from multiple intelligences, we gain a better understanding of how each construct is positioned. Gardner’s (1983) seminal book on multiple intelligences and frames of mind encourages a view of human intelligence that goes beyond one single way of conceptualizing and operationalizing intelligence, such as a binary of linguistic versus logical-mathematical capacity. Learning styles, in contrast, focus on how learners

approach materials; thus, they address a different process.

### 2.1.4 Metacognition versus LSV

For Nelson and Narens (1994), metacognition addresses a learner’s ability to monitor and control his/her own thought processes. Concurrently, Turner-Walker (2016) views metacognition as the “ability to think about what one is thinking about” (p. 3). According to this logic, awareness of a strong LSV as part of the self-system would entail a higher perceived self-efficacy, a more enabling emotional response, and arguably more motivation to embrace a topic presented.

## 2.2. Emerging insights on LSV

The main conceptual evolution of learning styles and LSV is two-pronged. Firstly, acknowledging versatility emphasizes that the quest is no longer to identify the one main learning mode deemed most effective for an individual, as this can create ambiguity and confusion if a learner does not necessarily adhere to such a single style (Honey & Mumford, 2009). Secondly, the field of learning styles currently needs innovation. In line with what others have argued (e.g. Coffield et al., 2004), the field has been controversial in having produced more than 70 conceptualizations based on limited and empirically unconvincing evidence. More importantly, the field of learning styles has not made a crucial next step in its conceptual maturation process. The field of leadership, for example, has moved from definitions and various conceptualizations to identifying leadership types, and has now reached the insight that it is not one effective leadership style that matters the most, but rather leadership style versatility that enables leaders to cope situationally with a given scenario (Kaplan & Kaiser, 2003).

Reviewing the literature, it becomes clear that progress in the field of learning styles has long been overlooked. As the following exposition will show, there is an opportunity to trigger progress towards understanding learning versatility by considering how the term ‘versatility’ applies in the leadership field. Opportunities to overcome specific criticism of

the learning style literature have arisen to alleviate or even overcome criticism as the field advances.

Initially, Pashler et al. (2008) pointed out numerous studies flawed by methodological weaknesses. For example, studies measure preferences, but not concrete abilities. They depict engaging and at times congenial topics, but not styles linked to learning effectiveness. The authors also criticize an overreliance on an unquestioned meshing hypothesis, even considering that a learner can still acquire new knowledge or skills if exposed to a less preferred learning experience. These authors continue their critique by pointing to the excessive commercialization and emergence of a learning style industry, while scientific, empirical evidence to support alleged benefits is not necessarily strong.

Hence, there is a need to reconceptualize and re-operationalize. Possibly, similar to the early stage understanding of leadership styles, some of the methodological weaknesses stem from a poor understanding of the learning styles field. Innovative approaches can help. Understanding that not a single style, but rather style versatility, can help in diverse and dynamic environments can open up new avenues for teaching, program design, strategizing on value in education, or advancing research. It could change the view on (1) what the focus should be if one is to explain learning success in the exploratory research phase, and (2) what should be measured and subsequently managed and improved when scholars continue with prescriptive research.

Inherently, the learning style debate as it was conducted in the past seems to foster a certain degree of inertia, which goes against the strong need for business schools to evolve (Lorange, 2012). As Thaker (2015) indicates, modern learning is a multi-level process which should include elements on the levels of knowing, doing, being and becoming. Besides the symbolic and ethical lens, the past learning style debate had a dominant means-to-end perspective. It focused on how to optimize the learning of established content and skills. The question was not how to create more versatile learners, nor to concretize the debate on

learning-to-learn (Stephens, 2013) or the ‘becoming’ idea (Thaker, 2015).

### 3. Methodology and Method

The nature of the research question, a typical ‘how’ question – “How do faculty members perceive LSV?” – requires a qualitative research methodology (Cohen et al., 2007) to capture the richer insights on the phenomenon of LSV.

I interviewed participants at a private business school in one of India’s major cities. The 18 faculty members at the research site were originally targeted as interviewees for confidential, anonymous (Christians, 2000), relatively open-ended interviews (Opdenakker, 2006). Grounded theory does not define and limit sample sizes in advance. Interviews continued until sufficient insight had been gained and all core questions were clarified.

Interviewees were all faculty members whose profession seemed to have honed their skill to explain their viewpoints in a very straightforward way. The interview process unfolded in highly effective manner, allowing the researcher to grasp the situation efficiently and effectively.

### 4. Empirical Results

Several trends become obvious in the data analysis. Firstly, the focused codes that emerged in the first interview turned out to be quite robust in terms of recurring codes or categories. The next step consisted of axial coding and aimed to relate core themes to each other. During this more in-depth analysis of the data, attending more precisely to the emerging categories, two main dimensions seem to align the captured comments most aptly. On the one hand, the quotes and codes could be categorized along the axis of level of analysis, of which the levels were (1) society, (2) institution, and (3) individual faculty member. The following sections will refer specifically to features of the Indian institution that was the research site for this study.

There are societal forces in the form of the national culture, which shape behaviours in this educational institution and the classroom. Delving

deeper into realm 1 shaped by national culture, the insight emerges that there is a national culture regarding the distribution of power. As for realm 2 – the institutional level –, it matters considering LSV, as the business school model seems to understand faculty members as a resource to be used in securing financial returns. Next on this axis of analysis is the personal level of the individual faculty member as realm 3. According to interviewee contributions, the body of faculty members have limited andragogy acumen and diverging degrees of idealism, caring and motivation. Although some of the interviewees showed idealism, overextension seemed to drain energy. Faculty members fulfilled students' cultural expectations if they merely lectured, or institutional expectations if they would superficially innovate. Generally, they attested to blindly adopting practices that one-directionally would diversify their teaching toolset. Before any positive change and professionalization can take place, there must be progress regarding awareness, and wellness at the Institutional level equally needs attention. The business model constrains investment, innovation or balanced workloads. Equally, individual faculty members do not drive their own learning, which, considering today's availability of free online resources, could easily have been more pronounced. The next level would be considering how to create interest, desire and action, which will have its own challenges and requirements for healthy development.

The second axis for categorizing participants' quotes and their codes will follow the action readiness scheme proposed by the AIDA sequence of constructs (Lee & Hoffman, 2015). This is a classical promotional theory from the marketing field which depicts action-readiness. Individuals must have the requisite awareness, interest, desire and eventual trigger action to get things started. Overworked faculty members who lack andragogic acumen or engagement would not be able to design and implement impactful LSV-oriented innovations.

Following Charmaz (2014), the action readiness framework should focus on the process related to the

core phenomenon. Scrutinizing the data, however, the overall situation at this study site resembles one where barriers to progress dominate. A number of interviewees were not even aware of the different learning styles concept. They merely deliver one-directional lecturing. Numerous comments came across as irrelevant when it came to addressing different learning styles or learning how to learn.

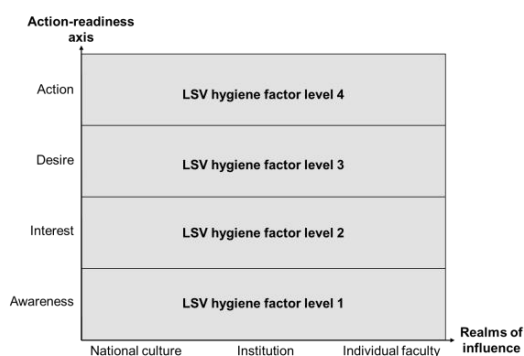
The next segment will discuss awareness paired with an interest in its relevance to high workload demands and the wish to comply with expectations that faculty should keep innovation costs low, not stand out, nor make colleagues look bad. Interviewee contributions affirm that the institutional structure discourages drastic divergences in various segments. A conclusion drawn from the interviewees is that faculty management can benefit from further alignment with innovative trends, preferably showing more idealism.

Also, considering that the literature pays a great deal of attention to learners' plasticity and the 'definitely unfinished' concept (Clark & Sousa, 2018) which determines that the best growth achievement is always yet to come, faculty members need to address skepticism, as pronounced in comment 10.10 ("Not all can adapt"), by heeding the literature in granting students more development opportunities.

In today's fast-moving world, with a next generation that is substantially more technology-oriented than their predecessors, professors do not always perceive themselves as 'superior' or as the ultimate experts.

This is very much in line with the latest globally available insights on learning and development which encourage learners to break out of highly socialized learning and move on to continuously self-authoring (Kegan & Lahey, 2009) their mental software (Hofstede & Minkov, 2010). To trigger efficient and effective action for launching efficient and effective initiatives in the field of LSV, the interviews reveal that faculty need either to receive more training in adult learning, or to drive their own learning, based on aligned incentives and workloads. The framework given in Figure 1 below presents the

two identified axes for coding and introduces four levels of hygiene factors that can explain the relatively poor orientation towards and implementation of LSV at this institution while also emphasizing the faculty view.



**Figure 1 Emerging outside-in grounded theory on LSV leveraging at the study partner institution**

## 5. Discussion and Interpretation

A key observation regarding the individual faculty members, but also regarding the institution and the entire learning context, refers to the general well-being of the institution. Considering the rather set national culture, the power distribution between faculty members and in the classroom, and the constraining business model in a highly competitive and commercialized business school education market, it appears that the nature of the learning context encountered at the study partner organization is confined, and important factors for its wellbeing need to be attended to.

External factors or exogenous forces appear to pose barriers to an environment conducive to learning, so that more attention should be paid to learning styles and versatility. The overall situation, and the related grounded theory, is therefore one that is best described as an ‘outside-in’ model with stronger exogenous than endogenous factors enabling the institution to cope with and overcome their restrictions. Whatever happens in the classroom is shaped predominantly by external factors, such as national culture, the institution and its owners, the school’s business model, short-term vision, limited

faculty freedom and development, and harsh performance pressure on faculty despite tenure not being the norm.

The insight on action readiness can be linked to organizational theory, theory on motivation and organizational strategy. Contingency theory, as detailed and critically reviewed by Donaldson (2001), posits that there is no one best way to structure and manage an institution. While it would have been interesting to study how to optimize existing approaches to LSV, I acknowledge that hygiene factors, which allude to Herzberg et al.’s (1959) semantics as already mentioned, must first be better understood from a conceptual and theoretical point of view and taken care of in practice, before higher levels of professionalism will be within reach. In sum, the grounded theory is one of bottlenecks and critical hygiene factors. According to a contingency theoretical view on the emerging grounded theory, there is a need to understand and manage these factors situationally.

This is linked to the theory on the strategic direction of organizations as Mintzberg et al. (2009) described it. Especially the environmental school seems highly relevant for a closer interpretation of the nature of the grounded theory in this study. National culture substantially influences the learning atmosphere in light of students’ behaviour and expectations, but also of the faculty members’ attitudes. Worsening external market conditions limit the business model and shape the owner’s expectations, representing an externally imposed limitation on the faculty’s room to maneuver.

At this early stage, the developing grounded theory on LSV from a faculty perspective is strongly influenced by external forces in an outside-in view of factors at work. Intrinsic factors, to stay in Herzberg et al. (1959) set of semantics, such as idealism among faculty aspiring to be education specialists or a business school owner being active in the ‘industry’ for other values than financial gain, are not central in this early phase of theorizing on LSV in the chosen setting. Faculty members react to institutional incentives, as well as to business model constraints

and pressures from the encountered organizational culture.

Figure 1 given above, presents a framework based on the abductive reasoning process. This points to the need for clarifying what a theory is, and what this study's chosen approach to theorizing is. Following Thornberg and Charmaz (2012), a positivist definition of 'theory' emphasizes statements on the relationship between abstract concepts which cover a wide range of observations captured in the data with the goal of explaining and predicting events. These authors explain that a more interpretive definition of theory centralizes not explanation, but understanding.

The more pertinent teleological function of a theory is to help interpret the phenomenon being investigated, and not necessarily to articulate the causal links. According to Charmaz (2014) "grounded theory has had a long history of raising and answering 'why?' questions in addition to 'what?' and 'how?' questions. It is equally common for grounded theory to produce new and more relevant questions, such as on the actual 'why?' (Charmaz, 2014, p. 245) that underlies a phenomenon, and not just the 'how'.

The data collected in the study partner organization yields a strong 'why?' as the major question. Why is there so little progress towards applying learning style concepts? In a relatively small private school, one would expect more variables to be controllable compared to those in a larger school with a more rigid bureaucracy, as is often portrayed, e.g. by Thomas et al. (2013).

Charmaz (2014) concludes that grounded theory can be considered "as theory that contains both positivist and interpretivist elements because it relies on empirical observations and depends on the researcher's constructions of them" (p. 231). While the constructivist nature of the abductive research process becomes clear in light of the aforementioned transition from focused data to axially coded categories and the grounded theory of wellness factors, the positivist nature of the theory needs more obvious strengthening. Considerable effort is needed

to ensure this study's insight will be linked to a more objective external reality assumed to exist in parallel. The core question is therefore whether there are factors to be identified more generally which can explain institutions' lack of progress towards implementing more LSV.

Even granting that the concept is new in its explicit form, more latent learning efforts might have been triggered elsewhere. As Markovsky (2004) states, "a theorist attempts to convince readers that certain conclusions flow from a set of premises" (p. 831). I shall do this with a series of hypotheses given below, which cover national culture, institutional level constructs, as well as aspects situated on the individual faculty level emerging from Figure 1 and the accompanying analysis. These hypotheses can be elaborated further, e.g. by delving deeper into other cultural dimensions, key institutional variables, as well as additional faculty features.

H1: National culture impacts the diffusion of LSV in a business school.

H2: The higher the power distance in a national culture, the more difficult the diffusion of LSV becomes.

H3: The business model of a school impacts the faculty's orientation towards LSV.

H4: The more an organizational culture fosters innovation, the easier it is to diffuse LSV as a new teaching priority.

H5: The higher the andragogic skills of faculty members, the easier it is to diffuse LSV as a new teaching priority.

H6: The more engaged a faculty member feels, the easier it is to diffuse LSV as a new teaching priority.

H7: The more a faculty member feels like a true educationist, the easier it is to diffuse LSV as a new teaching priority.



These hypotheses can be tested directly, which is the intention so as to enable subsequent research. This could, through multivariate analysis, quantitatively confirm (or reject) the aforementioned four levels of hygiene factors across three levels of abstraction, so that LSV initiatives are better understood and are more likely to succeed.

## Conclusions

This article investigated a crucial avenue for innovation in business schools. As they have to review the value they create on an ongoing basis, focusing on learning competencies, i.e., learning to learn, can and should become a new key performance indicator. This applies even more in a world in which business school graduates and their employers ought to cope with ever more adversity in their environments. Being able to learn better and faster can become the central coping mechanism under one's control. For progress to happen, however, the organizations in which such an innovation ought to take place must be understood. This study contributes the first grounded theory to better understanding the faculty's view. Hypotheses presented in this article will help future research generalize gained insights across settings.

## Conflict of Interest

The author declares that he has no conflicts of interest in this work.

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