

# EXAMINING THE INFLUENCE OF LEARNING STYLE AND DEMOGRAPHICS ON INSTRUCTIONAL METHOD PREFERENCE

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**Abstract** *The emerging demographic dividend offers India a latent potential for attaining economic prosperity. With the rise of globalisation and the rampant use of technology in our everyday lives, learning has become an indispensable part of our society as well. Albert Einstein aptly said that “Intellectual growth should commence at birth and cease only at death”. Consistent with this thought, it is widely accepted that in the contemporary age, any individual, organisation or a country would cease to progress, if it fails to acknowledge lifelong learning. Individuals are the foundation of any society and country, and an understanding of how they learn plays a crucial role in their growth and development. Since learning is a vital ingredient of organisational growth that provides momentum to a country’s economic development. So this study is an attempt to provide better insight in the field of adult learning. With India boasting of the largest youth proportion of the world, it is evidently important for us to cater to the needs of this young populace to facilitate global competitiveness and achieve the power of demographic dividend. The aim of this paper is to identify potential factors that may help trainers to adopt the most suitable method for training adult learners.*

**Keywords:** *Training Method, Learning Style, Learning, India, Demographic*

## INTRODUCTION

Have you ever wondered why people perform differently, even though they are taught the same way? The same lecture is grasped differently and the same tutor is understood differently. Well, studies indicate that while extraneous factors do play a role, our genes may also be responsible for the same. Born to different families, growing up in different cultures and experiencing dissimilar facets of life; the experience of learning also tend to differ substantially for every individual.

Extant literature reveals that today’s learners are different and the new age mantra is to differentiate and excel. With the growing emphasis being placed on the human side of the organisation; recently even ASTD (American Society for Training and Development) was rebranded as ATD (Association for Talent Development), indicating the value being laid on talent development in the contemporary organisations. One of the greatest management thinkers of the last century, Peter Drucker too believed that ‘talented people’ are the essential element of every successful enterprise.

Moreover, the increasing demand of ever new products and practices has resulted in changes in the nature of work as also

the skills required. As such, knowledge is no more static and employee development has become a strategic priority for most organisations. Subsequently, training in organisations has evolved beyond its traditional function of merely imparting knowledge and skills to a more pronounced role of learning and creating and sharing knowledge amongst the members of the organisation.

Growing by leaps and bounds, India today is at the centre-stage of the world economy. This impetus is firmly rooted to our demographic dividend, the blurring international boundaries and the increasing percentage of FDI, making India a promising place to work at. Consequently, there have been swift changes in the economy and several new sectors have emerged. This demands for revolutionising training and development to cater to the needs of the emerging dynamic workforce.

With organisations pouring in huge capital for training and development of their employees, it becomes crucial to justify these investments. In times of capital crisis and when employee development has become a strategic priority; it is crucial for contemporary researchers, trainers and organisations to identify factors that may help achieve fruitful training outcomes. This study is an attempt to identify factors that may help trainers in the proper selection of training methods in order to achieve the desired outcomes.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

India is blessed with a very young population and it is expected to have a median age of 29 by 2020. This window of opportunity can only be tapped if we invest heavily to achieve valuable dividend from the emerging youth demographics. In her research paper, Hajela (2012) points out that it is ironical that inspite of the huge population, India is not being able to meet the demands of the emerging industries. This is partly due to lack of inclusiveness and poor coordination in the complex federal government structure, but mainly due to the absence of proper training. Acknowledging the urgent skills deficit in the country, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has created a ministry to take up the agenda of skill development and entrepreneurship (Surabhi, 2014).

Furthermore, in the contemporary Information Age, the drivers of GDP have shifted from tangible assets to intangible ones. For accelerated growth and to attain competitive advantage, organisations believe that the most critical asset is their people. As such, organisations today are increasingly linking their growth and performance metrics to learning. This paradigm shift coupled with the fast pace of development and innovation requires employees to learn constantly (Alonderiene, 2009; Zuzeviciute & Tereseviciene, 2010) and faster (Kian & Sabbaghan, 2012) in their professional life.

The field of training and development is an impatient child of learning and re-learning. It is a powerful catalyst that drives change and assists organisation to achieve its stated strategic objectives (Noe, 2010). Training is the planned intervention (Chiaburu & Tekleab, 2005; Sahinidis & Bouris, 2008) that provides employees with opportunities to learn how to perform more effectively and prepares them for any changes in their job (Alipour, Salehi, & Shahnava, 2009). Besides, fostering creativity in employees, training helps prevent manpower obsolescence (Obisi, 2011), by providing learning experience that instils a relatively permanent change in an individual (Arthur *et al.*, 2003) resulting in long-term success of the organisation (Rijamampianina, 2010).

In an era of self-expression and customisation, every individual prefers to be treated differently and the 'one size fits all' concept fails to prevail. Born out of the notion of individuality, employees in organisations too want their employers to offer them customised packages and distinct treatment. As such it is essential to identify potential factors that contribute towards enhanced performance; for isolating and working upon them to cater better propositions to employees. In order to magnetize, retain and get highest quality output, companies are investing heavily in providing proper training to their employees.

One such dynamic facet may be employee training and development. It is envisaged that tailoring training and development in accordance to the individual preference may offer parallel excitement that a meal just cooked for you or a perfect fitting pair of jeans can offer, resulting in greater satisfaction and elevated performance. Petrakova & Sadana (2007) advocate that the quality of training and its impact on students is dependent on many factors including faculty, curriculum, training methods, teaching aids, facilities and the students themselves, who have their own experiences and expectations.

Moreover studies support the notion that an instructional intervention may facilitate learning in some individuals and not in others. This is because each individual possesses distinct aptitudes, abilities, and past history, and so they are likely to benefit from an instructional intervention in different ways (Katzell & Goldstein, 1989, as cited in Bennett & Arthur, 2001). Existing literature, thus points to the fact that tailoring training methods according to trainee's needs is decisive in the success and the performance of trainees.

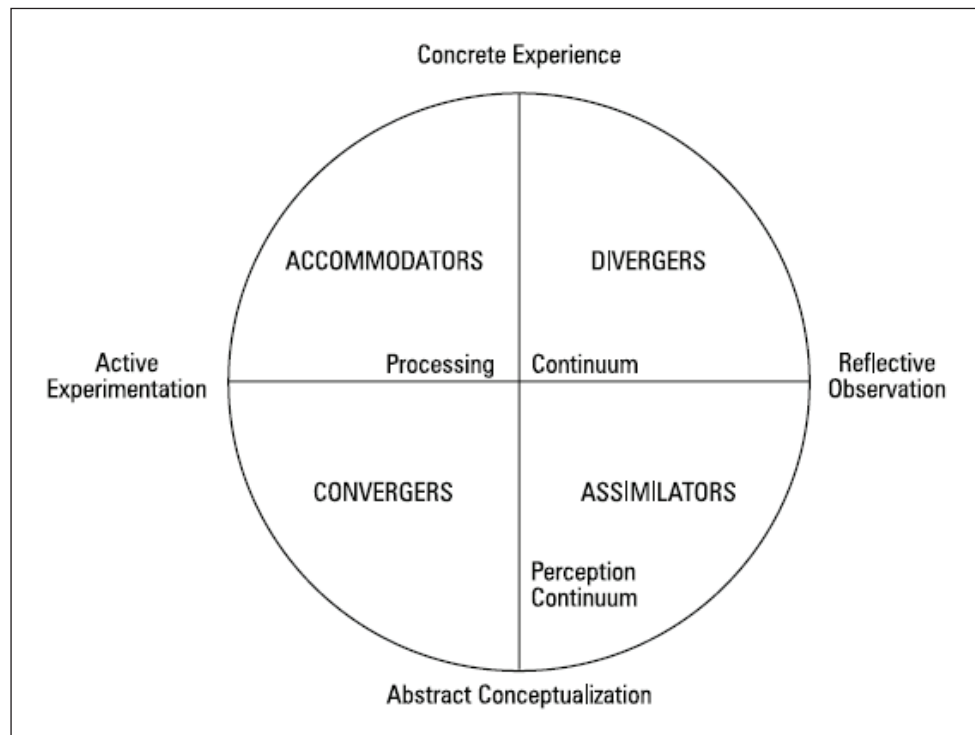
Training method is a way of getting information to the learners (Chow, Woodford & Showers-Chow, 2008). It is a process, technique or an approach which a trainer employs to deliver training content (example: lecture, online tutorials, videos, role-play to name a few). Although there are numerous training methods, the right selection of teaching method is essential for effective training (Vijayabanu & Amudha, 2012).

Furthermore, the effectiveness of a particular method is dependent upon the characteristics of the trainees as well as the program (Salehi *et al.*, 2009). Therefore, trainers should consider these characteristics while adopting a particular method(s) of instruction. Given that, each employee is unique in the way they absorb information (Sanders, 2011), so a method should be chosen that is cost-effective as also helps motivate one to learn, retain and transfer what they have learned (Sinniah, 2008).

Jones, Jones, Latreille, & Sloane (2009) state that while the relationship between training and performance is complex, the profiling of workers and their training requirements may pay huge dividends to the organisation. Besides the demographic variables; trainee's learning style, locus of control, self-efficacy and motivation (Mathieu *et al.*, 1992) are some of the characteristics that have generated interest in researchers in the recent past. Besides, demographics, this study has considered learning styles which indicates the way "how" an individual prefers to learn.

Since learning style refers to consistent individual differences in the way individuals approach learning tasks (Kolb, 1984; Price, 2004), so its understanding facilitates the instructor or designer to develop a curriculum to address the diverse needs of the learners (Pallapu, 2007). It also aids them in the

Figure 1: Kolb's Learning Style Model



Adapted from Buch & Bartley (2006)

proper selection of techniques and methods of instruction (Alfonseca, Carro, Martín, Ortigosa, & Paredes, 2006) to suit the preferences of the different individuals. Moreover several studies have claimed positive improvements in individual performance when novel concepts are illustrated in their preferred style (Cassidy, 2004; Davis, 2006; Pallapu, 2007; Tie & Umar, 2010).

For the purpose of obtaining information pertaining to learning style, Kolb's Learning Style Inventory (version 3) (Kolb, 1999) was used, as shown in Figure 1. The instrument assesses the learning style of an individual by measuring the relative preference for use of the four modes (Kayes, 2005). The upper left quadrant signifies accommodating learning style while the upper right quadrant represents a diverging style of learning. In the lower quadrants, assimilating learning style is represented by the right quadrant, whereas the left side signifies the converging style of learning (Kolb, 1984).

## PURPOSE

Increased trade liberalisation, rural consumption and domestic reforms are sprouting India's global competitiveness (Accenture, 2013). The present demographics at the workplace signify a dynamic mix of varied generations, cultures and qualifications. In order to create a pertinent work culture and transcending the ladder to success, it is

indispensable for organisations to understand the needs of its employees and provide an ambience in accordance with their requirements.

In 2013, a report by Accenture declared that 'government, business and civil society need to collectively accelerate efforts to manage India's demographic transition. To do so, they will have to continue developing and implementing localised strategies. And they will need to recognize that there is no one-size-fits-all solution to using India's demographic transition to spur growth'.

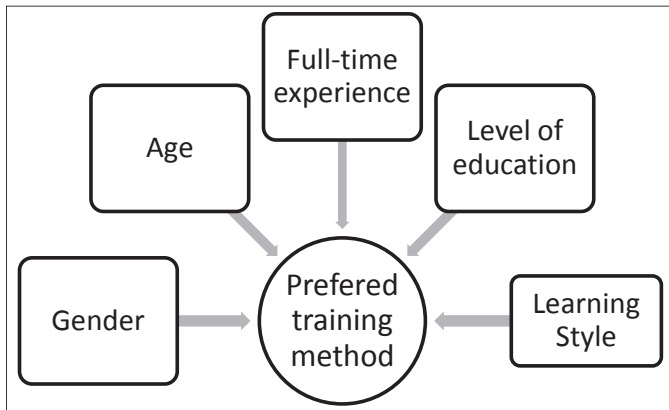
This calls for designing training in accordance with the requirements and preferences of the trainees (employees of organisations). Adding to this concern is the study by Basha (1971), which suggests that multinationals operating in India find that their home-tested techniques do not have the same impact in the Indian context. Due to differences in culture and background business games, T-groups, case methods and workshops are not as effective as lecture-cum-discussion method is in India (Vijayabanu & Amudha, 2012).

Furthermore, since every individual differs substantially in thought and ways, so it is also important to identify these distinguishing factors. One prominent concept that has attracted the attention of educational psychologists is learning style of an individual. Kolb (1999) asserts that an appreciation of differing learning styles can help people to work more effectively in teams, resolve conflict, communicate at work and at home. As such, its understanding may support

the trainers in facilitating effective outcomes.

This study has been undertaken with the objective of identifying whether certain factors contribute in individuals preferring a particular method for learning. The findings will be of value to organisations in making learning fun and beneficial, rather than a trifle and boring activity, meant just to boost the performance report cards.

**Figure 2: Conceptual Model**



## OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To assess whether individuals prefer a particular training method based upon demographics (gender, age, educational level, full-time work experience).
2. To assess whether individuals prefer a particular training method based upon learning styles.
3. To identify the preference of training methods by employees in different industries.

## METHODOLOGY

A questionnaire was designed to gauge the preferred training method by employees in different organisations. The questionnaire also contained items to determine individual learning styles, based on Kolb's Learning Style Inventory and some demographic variables.

In their annual review of key macroeconomic and sectoral trends (*India in 2013: A quick recovery is a must*), Accenture had listed several upcoming industries that have a potential to propel our economy forward.

Ten potential industries were selected from this report and an online questionnaire was designed and mailed to a total of 1000 employees (100 in each of the 10 major industries). Table 1 is an outline of the total number of responses obtained from each segment.

## FINDINGS

Growing up in a system of teaching generally restricted to chalk-and-talk method, it may be interesting to investigate the preference of adult learners for other learning modes, which they encounter much later in their career. Since both the dependent and independent variables were categorical, so chi-square test of association was employed to assess the relationship.

Data were entered and analysis was done in SPSS (version 16). Table 2 presents the cross tabulation of the considered demographic variables and learning styles with respect to preferred training method.

**Table 1: Detail of the Number of Questionnaires Issued and Responses**

Industries	Number of responses returned	Total number of questionnaires sent
IT & ITES	34	100
Banking & Insurance	22	100
Retail	37	100
Hospitality	28	100
Healthcare & Drugs	39	100
Education	33	100
Engineering	31	100
Automotive	27	100
FMCG	34	100
Oil & Gas	19	100
Total	304	1000

**Table 2: Cross Tabulation of Demographics and Learning Styles v/s Preferred Training Method**

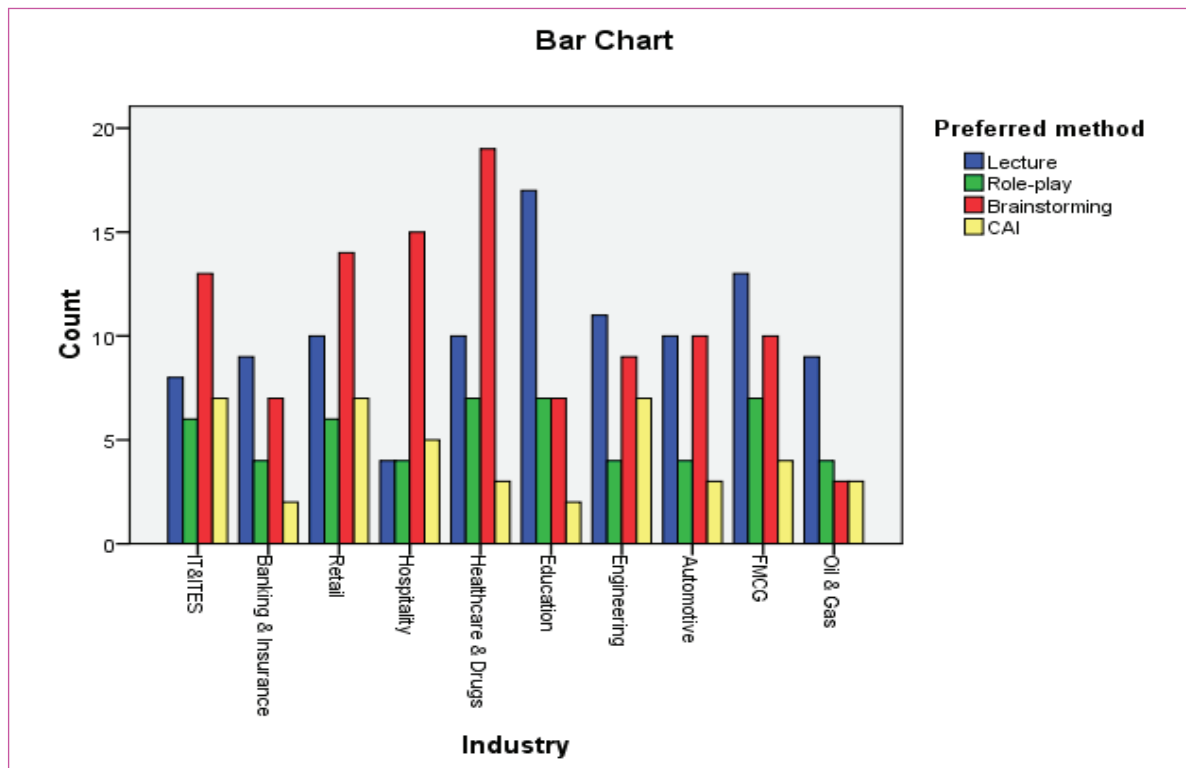
Gender * Preferred method Cross tabulation						
		PREFERRED METHOD				
		Lecture	Role-play	Brainstorming	CAI	Total
GENDER	Male	71	48	80	37	236
	Female	30	5	27	6	68
	Total	101	53	107	43	304
Age * Preferred method Cross tabulation						
AGE	Less than 30	34	28	45	13	120
	30-45	60	20	58	28	166
	More than 45	7	5	4	2	18
	Total	101	53	107	43	304
Education * Preferred method Cross tabulation						
EDUCATION	Graduation	15	7	17	7	46
	Master's	67	46	79	30	222
	Doctoral	19	0	11	6	36
	Total	101	53	107	43	304
Experience * Preferred method Cross tabulation						
EXPERIENCE	0-5	22	17	26	14	79
	6-10	35	19	36	9	99
	10+	44	17	45	20	126
	Total	101	53	107	43	304
Learning style * Preferred method Cross tabulation						
LEARNING STYLE	EA com-modator	16	6	26	8	56
	Diverger	44	34	53	19	150
	Assimilator	28	11	14	7	60
	Converger	13	2	14	9	38
	Total	101	53	107	43	304

Table 3 presents the chi-square test values for the six relationships. We find that gender, level of education, and learning styles indicate a significant relationship with respect to preferred training method. While age and full-time work experience failed to indicate any relationship with regards to preference for a training method.

–Figure 3 illustrates the relative preference for the different training methods (here, lecture, role-play, brainstorming and computer-assisted instruction [CAI]) in the ten different emerging industries in India.

**Table 3: Chi-Square Test**

Pearson Chi-Square	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Gender	10.494	3	.015
Age	10.688	6	.099
Education	13.081	6	.042
Experience	5.920	6	.432
Learning style	18.760	9	.027
Industry	28.295	27	.396

**Figure 3: Relative Preference for the Different Training Methods**

From Figure 3 it can be deduced that although there has been much advancements in the field of technology, but even today CAI is least preferred method for training. Furthermore, lectures seem to prevail in most cases along with brainstorming method.

## DISCUSSION

People in India have since long embarked on the journey of learning in the very traditional way, lecture. Additionally, the system of joint families supports the concept of discussing problems and identifying methods to tackle them. The results reveal that we are still quite firmly rooted to our traditions. Consequently, the preference seems to weigh more in the direction of lectures and brainstorming rather than newer formats- role-play and CAI. Literature too contends that being a dominant style of training delivery (Richardson & Kliener, 1992; Salas & Cannon-Bowers, 2001; Buch & Bartley, 2002), lectures seem to be greatly preferred even by trainers in India (Khatun, 2013).

It was interesting to find that people differ in their preference for different training methods based on their gender. The males indicated greater preference for brainstorming while the female preferred lectures. Severiens & Dam (1997) too points out that 'women more often use memorizing and rehearsing strategies, they depend on the teacher or the school to organise their learning processes and define

learning more often as taking in knowledge. Men on the other hand, are more ambivalent as to why they are studying and lack a certain kind of regulation, more so than women.'

While the different age groups did not indicate any significant relationship with respect to a preferred method for learning, however, it was observed that most of the employees desired the lectures in the age groups 30-45 and above. On the other hand, those much younger, that is less than 30 years desired brainstorming over the traditional lectures. Oxborrow (2011) too observed a greater preference for face-to-face learning by nearly 74% of the sample indicating the leverage that lectures still possess. While Tolbize (2008) writes that people of different generations indicate liking for different learning approaches. It may be the reason, that our fundamental method of learning is lectures and so we tend to find it more comfortable and hence the liking.

The level of education also indicated significant differences in the proffered training method. The graduates and post-graduates generally preferred brainstorming, while the doctorate employees preferred lectures. In a study by Robatin (2009), he found an insufficient evidence to conclude that a relationship exists between one's education level and how one prefers to be trained. However, he too said that certain trends have emerged but not to the point of statistical significance.

While Uessler, Ricketts, Duncan, & Peake (2006) found that the years of teaching experience had a tendency to influence the preferred forms of delivery. However, in the present study it was found that there was no significant relationship between experience and preferred mode of learning. Further investigations are required in this domain, but as of now, we may conclude that work experience fails to influence a person's decision regarding any particular training method.

Besides, these demographic variables, an interesting dimension of this study was to determine the influence of individual learning style on preference for a particular method of training. The results reveal that there is a significant association between the two. Research too suggests that individual's with different learning styles are likely to prefer different training methods (Alfonseca *et al.*, 2006; Davis, 2006; Pallapu, 2007; Saks, Haccoun & Belcourt, 2010; Tie & Umar, 2010).

The findings also reveal that the accommodators and divergers show preference for brainstorming. While the assimilators indicated proclivity towards the traditional lectures and the convergers showed almost similar performance towards lectures and brainstorming.

Literature indicates that as assimilators prefer information to be presented in a systematic and organised sequence (Buch & Sena, 2001), so they tend to prefer lectures as their preferred instructional method (Nilson, 2010). While studies indicate that the most effective strategies for divergers are brainstorming, small group activities, simulations, group projects, discussions, and case studies (Druzhinina, 2009). This is because they enjoy generating a multitude of divergent ideas on a scope (Kolb, 1984; McLeod, 2010).

In formal learning situations, people with accommodating learning style prefer group work and like to set goals, participate in field work and test different approaches to complete projects (Druzhinina, 2009; Kolb, 1984). Training methods that encourage independent discovery or allow them to be an active participant in the learning process are best suited for accommodators. They prefer to work with others and enjoy finding out new experiences (Kolb, 1984; Kolb & Kolb, 2005), in this study we found that they brainstorm, which happens to be an involving method.

Studies indicate that convergers are risk-averse and prefer to learn in a trial-and-error environment that allows them to "fail safely" (Felder, 1996). Therefore, they generally indicate a penchant for computer-based training over other delivery modes (Buch & Bartley, 2002). However, the present study revealed that convergers prefer to learn in lecture or brainstorming environments. This raises a question as to whether individuals of a particular style show stable preference for a particular method, or does the style or preference tend to change with time and/or environment.

For instructional designers, corporate trainers, and organisations, there is clear value in understanding learning styles in order to identify learning difficulties as well as optimise the efficiency and effectiveness of employee training and development. It further facilitates the trainers to make trainees aware of their own pace and processes of learning thereby helping them to become more effective as autonomous, self-directed, life-long learners.

Lastly, the study also reveals that most of the employees, irrespective of the industry to which they belonged showed preference for either lectures or brainstorming. However, there existed no significant difference in this relationship. A similar pattern had emerged in a study by Robatin (2009).

## CONCLUSION

Forgoing the traditional economic structure, the Indian industry has travelled a long journey and has evolved into a more liberal, modern, technology-based and dynamic system. Realizing the emerging realities of the contemporary workplace, it becomes fundamental for organisations to invest profoundly in their human capital. In fact, now more than ever, in order to remain competitive, organisations must rely on workplace learning and continuous improvement (London & Moore 1999, as cited in Salas & Cannon-Bowers, 2001).

The past several years have witnessed tremendous growth in the field of research on employee training. Moreover, with the numerous instructional methods at the disposal of corporate trainers, and the amplifying dilemma over the proper selection of an appropriate methodology, organisations need a delivery method that can help them reduce travelling costs besides enhancing learning and the transfer of training. Consequently, the findings of this study can be a practical guide map for the organisations and corporate trainers.

As has been observed in the present study that the learning styles have substantial influence on the preference for an instructional approach, so an interesting direction for future research is to incorporate the 'matching hypothesis' and study the differences in learning performance by providing training to individuals of a particular learning style in their preferred learning environment. Likewise, future researchers may also consider longitudinal studies and analyses conducted with greater sample size to effectively validate and generalise the results. Studies of this nature would provide valuable insight to organisations and HRD practitioners.

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