



“Blended learning” is used so often among learning professionals that it has begun to lose its meaning. It means using the best delivery methodologies available for a specific objective, including online, classroom-based instruction, electronic performance support, paper-based, and formalized or informal on-the-job solutions among numerous others. In most cases, what is labeled “blended learning” is typically one topic, offered in numerous ways, or a hodgepodge of different training offerings under the same topical umbrella.

In a survey we conducted of more than 1,500 organizations, one participant stated, “We provided on-demand, traditional, and live web training programs for all our product offerings, which allowed our customers to choose which method worked for them.” But that’s not a blend; it’s a menu, along the lines of, “Would you like your eggs scrambled, fried, or over easy?”

The other typical definition of blended learning we often encounter requires that participants do some prereading prior to attending a class, attend a live class, and participate in an on-the-job assignment or a webinar that checks back in with the trainees.

In select cases this might be a blend. Unless the three disparate offerings are integrated to ensure a cohesive delivery of the learning objectives, the trainees will dismiss one or more elements of

Real Blended Learning Stands Up

Moving beyond mixed offerings to build the best blended learning.

By Jennifer Hofmann and Nanette Miner

the training because they perceive completion of those elements as optional.

Blended learning in practice

Have you noticed you never hear the term “blended training,” but always “blended learning”? That’s because “training” implies that an outside facilitator (either remote or face to face) is leading the learner experience. Blended learning allows us to include a variety of learning methods, from self-study materials such as job aids and books, to field trips (for example, site visits), simulations, or on-the-job experiences with a mentor or a coach.

One of the best blended learning offerings we came across in our research involved a large online business that offered off-the-shelf leadership development classes. The content met the needs of the organization, but the design of the content required that the organization physically send thousands of people to a training site, and the administrative side of the training process was just too cumbersome and expensive.

A different training solution was required. The answer was a blended curriculum, and the approach that was developed included

- Self study e-learning and prework, which concluded with a worksheet to print out and bring to the live class.
- An instructor-led class, either online or classroom-based depending on the trainee’s location, which put participants in breakout rooms to role-play leadership skills. The blended integration required that the individual complete her prework to role-play during the live portion.
- An on-the-job performance assessment of the skill they learned and practiced, which required them to again use the worksheet, and to document how they applied their learning.

The key to the entire blend was that each “piece” of the training was depen-

dent on another. Asynchronous and synchronous work were integrated to such a degree that a participant could not successfully pass the class without completing each component.

Styles upon styles

Besides the cost savings of not conducting all training in the classroom, blended learning also can enrich the learning process by engaging a variety of learning styles that will appeal to different participants. Some learners like to work on their own without any direction at all.

Others like to learn on their own, but within a structured program of “to-dos.” Still other learners prefer the social aspects of learning such as formal and informal interaction with peers. Finally, some learners need time following training for reflection and integration with their work responsibilities before the learning really “takes hold.”

Role playing is always a good activity when you are teaching interpersonal skills such as selling, negotiating, or counseling. Role play can be conducted with two or three individuals.

The two primary role players are the person who is practicing the skills (such as a salesperson or counselor) and the person who is playing the role of the recipient (such as a prospect or an adolescent). A third person may be added to the role-play scenario if you would like to have an observer give feedback to the person practicing his skills.

So the observer would watch the interaction between the two primary players and then give feedback, such as, “you seemed unsure of what to do next,” or “you did a great job linking product X to the client’s stated needs.” When conducting role plays, be sure that the person playing the role of the observer also gets a chance to practice the new skill.

Fun and games

Games can be used as a way to review content that was taught, or as a way to teach the content. Some examples

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include a game show in which you ask your participants to answer questions about what they've just learned, with topics divided into four or five areas.

When training salespeople to overcome objections, split the participants into teams and ask them to cite objections they often hear from prospects. Each team then "pitches" its objection (one at a time) to the other teams to spur them to come up with viable responses based on certain criteria that you have taught them.

Participants can respond to an objection by restating the objection, stating a fact or feature about the product, and relating it, as a benefit, to the client's known needs. The team that pitched the initial objection then chooses the winning response and the debrief includes a discussion of why the response was the right approach.

So the need for blended learning is simple. People learn differently, learning outcomes are achieved differently, and one approach cannot possibly fit all needs.

In addition, the convenience and flexibility of a variety of delivery methodologies means that more training can occur when and where it is needed, thus enabling the workforce to be efficient and highly skilled. No longer should trainers wait until there are enough people to fill a class.

We are so familiar with the standard learning model of sitting quietly in class while listening to an instructor at the front of the room that we often forget how powerful activities and visceral experiences can be when learning new information and skills.

Once you've designed a new training class, put it aside for two or three days. Then come back and look at it anew to assess whether you can convert some of the lecture material or other sedate portions of your training into experiential activities.

Blended learning is more than offering a variety of delivery technologies, however. It represents a shift in the

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profession. It takes time and effort to be successful at blended learning.

Trainers need to embrace new ideas about the way they design content, the way they facilitate programs, and the way participants learn. It is a simultaneous learning curve and change implementation. It is exciting and fraught with potential mishaps. But if the required time and effort are expended, the promise of blended learning will come to fruition.

*Jennifer Hofmann and Nanette Miner are co-authors of *Tailored Learning: Designing the Blend that Fits*, available Spring 2009.*

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