



It's [Not] the Technology, Stupid

While new technologies in your blended learning approach can be a great asset, it pays to be mindful of common pitfalls.

By Nanette Miner and Jennifer Hofmann

If your organization is already using classroom, synchronous, and asynchronous content to some degree, it might seem a snap to implement a blended learning curriculum. The technologies are in place, so you already have all of the components, right?

It's actually not that simple. When implementing any distributed learning system, organizations often find themselves focusing on the technology, while participant success is an afterthought. There seems to be an assumption that participant success will come naturally, and the technology will do the work for us.

Technology that is made available via virtual classroom, video, Flash, or other system, is a means to an end, successfully meeting the instructional goals and objectives. When the technology

is treated as the destination, programs often fall flat because the choice of delivery tool becomes more important than the content. Tool selection is then allowed to dictate what is included in the course design; for example, if the tool allows for cool animations, then animations are included, whether or not they have instructional value.

These problems are amplified when programs are blended together. Learning professionals invest in software, infrastructure, and bandwidth and expect instructional designers,

facilitators, and participants to sign right up for the journey. And in doing so, they are not investing in a successful learning paradigm.

While technology, or the lack thereof, certainly has an impact, the actual nuts and bolts should be the core focus. Each organization will need to develop a strategy to implement the right solutions, taking into account their individual curriculum, audience, and other factors.

Ensuring success of technology use

Often, implementing blended learning is considered a technology initiative. But an organization would be much better served looking at it as a change initiative. When talking with learners and trainers about what worries them, technology is usually first on their list, and the concerns are two-fold.

First, before attending their first training session, learners need to do a check to ensure the technology works, and, if for some reason it does not, determine whether they have enough time to fix trouble spots or find another solution. Problems usually arise with bandwidth or firewalls, not the technology itself. Ensure that the IT department is apprised of a new class star so they are ready to help.

Second, learners ask, "Can I use the technology successfully?" Although many online software packages, both synchronous and asynchronous, are touted by vendors as easy-to-use, participants need the opportunity to acclimate themselves to this new learning environment so that participation in the blend and collaboration with other participants is effortless.

A formalized learning orientation should be developed to ensure that these concerns are resolved prior to delivery of critical content. Participants should attend a live session that explains how to learn online, how to get help, and how to interact with peers and facilitators. Perhaps most importantly, participants should be provided

with an overview of the blended curriculum, and critical success factors for completion should be shared.

Overcoming the idea that online learning cannot be as effective as classroom training

With all the focus on technology, we often forget that the move to blended learning is a big change for all involved. Skilled classroom facilitators can no longer rely on body language and eye contact to be successful. Instructional designers need to create content for an environment they may not have experienced as a learner. And participants, forced to learn from unsophisticated designs and unprepared facilitators, often leave programs unsatisfied. Such personal factors, combined with the complexity of multiple technologies, make blended learning curricula appear confusing or involving too much work.

Attestation proves to participants that blended learning works. Start by piloting a curriculum that is not immediately critical, and allow participants to opt in to the pilot. Make changes, document successes, and then publish the results.

You may need to go through this process several times with different content types. Application training, leadership training, and business planning are all examples of curricula that deliver very different training outcomes, and you might need to make the case for all different content types.

An additional benefit of going through this process several times is that you'll start to identify the specific needs of your training organization for each of the content types and create a library of best practices and blunders for creating blended learning specific to your organization.

Keeping online offerings interactive

Because of the inexperience of the training designers and facilitators, opportunities to collaborate and practice are often lost, even in the

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live environment. The participant experiences content, followed by more content, followed by more content. Content dumps allow motivated participants to memorize information at the most basic level, while turning off unmotivated participants completely.

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The remedy is simple: the team that is creating and delivering the blended curriculum needs training to create an interactive, engaging learning environment. It entails much more than inserting existing slides into a virtual classroom or an asynchronous content development tool.

The delivery tool in and of itself will not make the content effective. The content must be redesigned to work in

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the new environment, and the facilitators need to be trained in how to deploy it. If you want your blended curriculum to be as effective as your classroom programs, an equivalent amount of preparation needs to be done.

Ensuring participant commitment and follow-through during “non-live” elements

“If it is really important, she’ll tell me when I get to the real class.” Let’s face it, we’ve taught our participants through all of their classroom experiences over the years that pre-work is optional. The important stuff will happen when we are together.

This is not just a challenge for the participants. If trainers do not require completion of self-directed work, then participants will not complete it. Trainers are left trying to decide if they should fill the knowledge gap and get participants up to speed on prerequisites or stay true to the class design.

To overcome this obstacle, facilitators should start this process during the learner orientation session and craft a message that explains the importance of each component of the blend. Continue to stress the importance and interdependencies throughout the self-directed components, then find ways to incorporate the knowledge gained during self-directed work into discussions.

For those who don’t get the message, attach consequences. If assignments are not completed or attendance is not satisfactory, do not issue a “complete” for the program. The truant participants will be forced to explain to their managers why they did not receive a certificate or why they need to take a class again.

Matching the best delivery medium to the objective

Because many organizations lack experience creating a successful blend, they often don’t align content with the most appropriate technology. Lecturing for 40 minutes on how to create a Pivot Table in Excel is not effective because creation requires hands-on practice. However, it is

so easy to demonstrate the topic using application sharing in a virtual classroom, that facilitators often mistake the demonstration for instruction and leave the learning up to the participants to figure out on their own time.

Designers of blended curricula need to remember that each learning objective has different characteristics. Some objectives lend themselves better to activity-based training, while others tend to be more knowledge or lecture oriented. Going through the process of designing the best training approach on an objective-by-objective level allows for exploration of a blended solution.

In addition to examining each objective individually, we must also view them in light of the whole curriculum to ensure that they are integrated instead of each being its own independent learning piece that happens to be associated with the same topic.

It’s not about “getting the technology right.” It’s about getting the people and the instruction right. That’s the destination at which we are trying to arrive. The hardware and software are just the cars and highways en route.

Nanette Miner and Jennifer Hofmann are co-authors of the upcoming *Tailored Learning: Designing the Blend that Fits* (ASTD Press, 2009), from which this article is adapted; nanette@trainingdr.com and jennifer@insynctraining.com.

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