



MORE THAN A MERGE

Successful blended learning demands thinking ahead and building a thorough understanding of modalities.

By Nanette Miner and Jennifer Hofmann

With all the training modules and technologies now available, organizations need to strategically decide which approach best meets their overall learning goals as well as the individual objective goals for a particular course.

Blended learning is a combination of learning objectives and learning modalities that are strategically combined to best achieve a training program's expected learning outcomes. For instance, when trying to teach new salespeople to open a sales call, a designer could consider several different approaches. The content could be delivered as a role-play session supported by lecture in a traditional classroom, a narrated PowerPoint or e-learning module, a computer simulation, a video, or a job shadowing experience.

Passively watching a video or an e-learning module is a less effective means of skills transfer than a training class attended by other participants with whom new hires can role-play. Ideally however, a combination of delivery modalities would achieve the best learning outcome.

Participants may start in the classroom and practice, using contrived case studies in a role-play activity. They may then ride along with a senior colleague using a checklist or job aid that helps them to identify the various steps in the

opening process and includes discussion questions to ask of the more senior salesperson once the sales visit is concluded.

They may then spend 20 minutes working with a self-paced e-learning simulation that proposes various sales scenarios and asks the new hire to choose the best opening statement. Finally, the training may culminate with the new-hire making her own prospect call and then receiving a critique from a more senior salesperson. The crucial element to the blended design is that each separate modality is dependent upon and integrated with the others.

During the course of our research, many learning professionals were surveyed regarding blended curriculum designs they had created. Some stood out as exemplary, and a focus on the familiar was a common thread throughout these best practices. For example, focusing on people, utilizing workbooks, and setting expectations are all things we know to incorporate in traditional designs, and it turns out, they are equally important when creating a blend.

Don't lose the human connection

Often, a blended learning curriculum incorporates asynchronous or independent activities. Designers should not abandon participants to these activities and expect them to be successful without support. Incorporate an interaction with a trainer or facilitator to ensure that the trainee still feels connected to the class as well as to provide assistance should the trainee feel lost or confused by the content.

For example, learners can complete a worksheet and submit it to the facilitator via a discussion board or an e-mail attachment and receive feedback from the facilitator in the form of an email reply or a phone call.

Always utilize a workbook

When designed well, workbooks not only supported the classroom

environment, but also acted as an after-class resource as well. This tool should not disappear simply because our delivery modality has changed. Especially in a blended design, participants need a connection between each of the activities or learning modalities.

A workbook is a perfect resource to assist participants in this regard. The workbook should include content, as well as contact and logistical information, activity instructions (both technical and instructional), and resources for use in the training or back on the job.

Ensure the facilitators understand the blend

Facilitators who are not accustomed to blended learning very often do not see the individual components of the blend as pieces of a larger whole. Some courses may offer a classroom element, an asynchronous element, and an on-the-job practical element, but because they don't understand the connections in the learning process, uninitiated facilitators may allow participants to choose one of the learning modalities rather than ensuring the completion of all three.

Alternately, the facilitator may choose to focus on an individual component (most often the classroom or "live" component), thereby giving implied permission to the participants to regard the other components as optional.

Set appropriate expectations

Many blended learning initiatives fail because participants and managers do not understand the amount of independent work that is required of the blend. This can go hand-in-hand with stressing the importance of completing all elements of the blend.

If participants don't understand that there may be seven hours of asynchronous work in addition to two hours of classroom time, they may fail for a number of reasons. They might only select the learning modalities

FACILITATORS WHO ARE NOT ACCUSTOMED TO BLENDED LEARNING VERY OFTEN DO NOT SEE THE INDIVIDUAL COMPONENTS OF THE BLEND AS PIECES OF A LARGER WHOLE.



that interest them or are within their schedule. They might not have allotted appropriate time to complete the asynchronous components. And finally, their managers might not appreciate the amount of work and “offline” time that is required for the entire learning process.

Start with what you know

A successful blended curriculum is not dependent on captivating technology. The importance of the blend is using the correct modality to teach an objective, applying the technology that best supports the desired outcome. If all you have is a telephone, email, and PowerPoint, you can create a successful blended curriculum. Don't be consumed by having the “right” technology to complete an objective. There are various ways to get to the same end result. Be resourceful, stay imaginative, and think about the best way possible for trainees to be successful.

If you are using a technology-based learning method, ensure that you and the learners know how to successfully interact with the technology before rolling out the curriculum. Frustrating technological experiences often reflect poorly designed training. If you design a narrated PowerPoint but participants don't know how to initialize the audio or don't realize that they need speakers to hear the audio, they will provide feedback that says the

learning methodology was not successful for them.

By the same token, if you're using a virtual classroom that allows for voice over IP, full participant chat, and synchronized web browsing, you had better know how to operate and troubleshoot all of the tools available within the classroom.

To get to the best blend, start with the basics. First, make sure the organization understands that a blend is more than a variety of delivery modalities, and that the design must provide connectivity between the different topics and the ways in which they are delivered to the learner. Next, make sure that the best practices are in place, or ready to go, before developing content. After a common understanding and solid design plan are in place, you can start to move forward into content creation.

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.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

T+D welcomes your comments. If you would like to respond to this article, or any article that appears in T+D, please send your feedback to mailbox@astd.org. Responses sent to the mailbox are considered available for publication and may be edited for length and clarity.

Don't choose Element K because we have more titles.

Choose us because we have better content.



Don't take our word for it—ask your employees. After experiencing our courses, customers tell us their employees prefer the quality and innovation delivered only by Element K and our best-in-class partners like Sun, Microsoft, Harvard Business Publishing, Fifty Lessons, and others.

Does it blend?

Element K offers more than just e-Learning. Our solutions support your classroom, online, and blended learning needs. Subscriptions to Element K e-Learning include full access to synchronized instructor-led training materials and *Blended Blueprint* participant guides so you can provide a real-world blended learning experience.

Transition and launch support.

Element K will make your launch or transition hassle-free. We'll map our courses to your existing programs. We'll manage any necessary platform migration. In short, we'll give you a complete transition plan that will make you smile.

To be thoroughly impressed, visit www.elementk.com, or call 1.800.434.3466.

**element k**
your learning solutions partner

©2008 Element K Corporation.



YES!

I want to subscribe for only \$99, (\$165 Outside the U.S.) to T+D magazine—12 monthly issues that keep me at the forefront of workplace learning and performance.

TD0833

Order Information

Name: _____

Title: _____ Company: _____

Address: _____ City: _____

State/Province: _____ Zip/Postal Code: _____

Country: _____ Email: _____

Phone: _____ Fax: _____

Check One: [] \$99 (USA) [] \$165 (Outside the US) [] VISA [] MasterCard [] Amex [] Discover [] Check (USD) (Payable to T+D)

Card Number: _____ Expiration Date _____

Signature: _____

Fax this form to 1.703.683.9591 OR Mail to: T+D, P.O. Box 1567; Merrifield, Virginia, 22116-9812, USA

Order online at store.astd.org
Phone: 1.800.628.2783 (1.703.683.8100 outside the US)

Orders processed within three business days.
If you have questions, please contact subscriberservice@astd.org

Prices valid through 12/31/2008. If you should wish to cancel your subscription for any reason, you will receive a refund on all unmailed issues. Your subscription to T+D may be a tax deductible business expense. Please allow 6 to 8 weeks to receive your first issue.

T+D is published by the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD)

010859.63250

