



“Blended Learning: a perspective”

by Lesley Mackenzie-Robb

Vantaggio Ltd

Email: lesley@vantaggio-learn.com

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Introduction

The term “blended learning” is a relatively new one to the education and training market, but as any trainer will know, blended learning has always been at the heart of the learning agenda, both at school and at work. In the simplest terms, blended learning is a learning process that relies on the use and support of diverse resources and methods within a structured and targeted curriculum. For instance, before e-learning came along, schools made use of videos and live TV broadcasts, images, media such as newspapers and out-of-school visits. All of these things were used to support and enhance the traditional teacher led classroom approach.

So, blended learning is not a new concept, conjured overnight. The modern term finds its origins in something called “b-learning”, which made a brief appearance in the early 2000s. b-Learning was a reaction to the then prevailing view that e-learning had spectacularly failed to live up to its promise. The perception was that e-learning had been launched onto the training market as the “magic bullet”, the 100% replacement for all forms of classroom-based training, with the promise of consequential cost reductions as there would no longer be a need to remove people from their place of work, nor pay for them to travel to training centres. In this role, e-learning soon proved inefficient and ineffective, so “b-learning” was heralded as the next natural evolution. Or, in layman’s terms, let’s return to the idea of mixed methods and resources!

Blended Learning and Learning Styles

In the modern adult learning and training environment, blended learning recognises that we all have different learning styles and preferences. It also recognises that certain topics lend themselves to particular methods or approaches.

Learning styles are, themselves, the subject of ongoing debate and research. There are literally dozens of different models, with Kolb’s Learning Style Inventory (LSI), updated in 1999, being perhaps the most popular in adult learning. This is based on a four-stage learning model: active, reflective, abstract and concrete. Interestingly, a recently published research report by the Learning and Skills Research Centre concluded that the LSI model is based exclusively on theory, and that there are problems with reliability and validity concerning its use. However, no-one disputes the idea that adults learn at different paces, and generally have a mix of different preferred learning styles. This is why an intelligent and pragmatic approach to blended learning is so important.

Not everyone will know what their particular learning style (or styles mix) is. Nor can organisations generally afford to offer different tailored versions of the same learning objective (or course) to suit individual preferences based on scientifically developed learner profiles for all of their staff! So, what blended learning seeks to achieve is a reasonable balance between learning styles and instructional design.

The Blended Learning Toolbox

The blended learning toolbox contains a varied and interesting menu of approaches and resources to choose from, including the following:

e-learning (self-paced)	Online analytics (self-assessment)	Linear Video	Audio	Text
Webinars	Conferences (on/off line)	Voice Over IP	Teacher led classroom based	One-on-one
Virtual Reality & Simulation	Collaborative exercises	Game-playing (multi-role)		

Blended learning instructional design is concerned with:

- Analysing the learning objectives (ie, subject matter and expected learning outcomes)
- Profiling the learners
- Assessing the learning environment
- And balancing this with the practical issues of time, cost and logistics.

High Level Strategic Approach

A **high level** check list offers a good and focused start to this exercise:

Question / Issue	Description	Solution
Course Training Objective	What is the purpose of the course, and the expected outcome for learners? Eg, Be able to describe and demonstrate the safest physical position for working at a computer on a desk.	
Duration of the course	How long will the course last / how long does it <i>need</i> to last?	
Frequency	How often will the course be run?	
Learner Volume	What is the expected take-up of the course? Eg, Do you anticipate having to run the course for up to 20 people at a time to ensure corporate targets are met?	
Training facilities	What facilities are available to support training? Eg, Training rooms, Desktop computers, Video equipment, Internet linked cafes? Consider also, what the usage of these facilities is for other activities.	
Learner Profiles	Do you have any information or statistics on the learning community? Eg, often senior and executive managers have a strong preference for off-site collaborate learning environments.	
Course Management	How will the course outcomes be managed? For Health & Safety related training, for instance, it	

	might be extremely useful to have a method of secure storage for learning outcome data.	
Course booking / allocation	How will the course be allocated and/or booked for individuals?	
HR availability	What resources are available to design, develop, procure, manage and support the course?	

The answers to this question set will start to tease out the most practical and effective options for course design and delivery. Also, don't forget that a single training course can, in fact, be a strategic mix of many different elements. For instance, a course might start with an on-line assessment to give a high level individual appraisal. Depending on the results of this, the next activity for a learner might be a short online e-learning self-paced course, which links into a practical role playing session with peers.

People often make the mistake that a single learning objective is fulfilled by one single resource and approach. Not so. Take our example of the safest physical position for working at a computer: an e-learning course might offer the "procedural" content, while a group training session with an instructor would provide the practice.

What is also vital to the blended learning solution is a fundamental understanding and experience of all of the different methods, approaches and media that might be adopted. You need to have a clear idea of the respective strengths and weaknesses in each case. For example, a well produced linear video presentation can be a powerful motivator, drawing its audience into emphasise with its message. However, it is a passive medium with low factual retention levels when compared with, say, a good interactive multimedia experience.

Creating the right blended solution therefore relies on a combination of skills sets and experiences, and a clear insight into why and how this will bring about the desired change in an individual's performance, behaviour, skills or knowledge.

***For more information about blended learning, contact Lesley Mackenzie-Robb
Lesley@vantaggio-learn.com or telephone +44(0) 1935 841433 or 07730 609646***