



Making Blended Learning Work

Effectively mix delivery mediums and approaches to save money and improve performance

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Introduction and Overview

The problem with e-learning

Self-paced e-learning is not for everyone or every organisation.

While many people love the flexibility and bite-sized nature of self-paced e-learning and are happy to learn anytime or anywhere, other people need to allocate specific time and create the right environment in order to work through a piece of e-learning. If an organisation is unable or unwilling to formally set aside the time and provide the environment for this kind of learning to happen, in many cases it never will.

The problem with class-based learning

The traditional alternative of class-based training can be time-consuming and expensive. So is there an impasse? You can't provide self-paced e-learning because no-one will use it, but you can't afford the time or expense of putting everyone through traditional class-based learning.

The blended learning solution

What about blended learning? We have heard the term for years and it has typically meant a combination of self-paced e-learning and class-based courses. This sounds like a nice idea – but it's never been wildly successful.

Well, there is some good news. Blended learning is changing. With web-technologies evolving and improving all the time, blended learning is starting to take on a new personality.

Let's examine several different aspects of new-look blended learning and see how some of them might work in action.

In the remainder of this document

You'll find the following in the remainder of this document:

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So read on to find out more...

Aspects of Blended Learning Explained

What is a webcast?

Think of a webcast as the equivalent of a short lecture or presentation delivered on the web. It can be run as a one-off (or repeated) live event scheduled for a specific day at a specific time.

How does a webcast work?

Attendees need a web connection on their computer to see PowerPoint slides or other visuals (such as a system or a website) and a telephone or a headset to listen to the audio.

Interaction is limited to an online chat facility - usually used at the end of the presentation to take a handful of questions from attendees.

The maximum length of time for this kind of event should be about 30 minutes.

What are the advantages of running a webcast?

The advantages to this kind of event are as follows:

- With a defined start and finish time attendees can schedule time to participate.
- It is a non-threatening introduction to a virtual learning event
- It is short, taking a minimum amount of time out of the attendees' day
- No travel is required
- The event can be recorded for viewing at a later date.

What are the disadvantages of running a webcast?

Here are some of the disadvantages:

- Attendees could get bored more easily than with a presenter in the room
- Events going on around them are distracting – an argument for listening with headphones
- It's easy to skip off after a couple of minutes – harder to do with a live presenter in the room
- It's easy to forget to attend or to decide something more important has come up

What is a webinar?

This is very similar to a webcast – with the same need for a web connection and audio. The big difference – the audio is two-way, so there is complete interactivity between the presenter or trainer and the attendees. This is the virtual classroom made real.

Webinars can be run for groups or on a one-to-one basis.

Important note: many people do not differentiate between the term webcast and webinar and use them interchangeably.

How does a webinar work?

The presenter/trainer can show their computer screen to attendees, or use a virtual highlighter pen to pinpoint key pieces of information on screen.

Online surveys, tests and other interactive exercises can be incorporated into the session. Attendees could even work through a short piece of self-paced e-learning as part of the session. Attendees and the presenter/trainer can look at each others individual computer screens.

Although the interactivity greatly enhances the experience for attendees an hour at one go is probably the maximum length for one of these sessions.

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Aspects of Blended Learning Explained, Continued

What are the advantages and disadvantages of webinars

Really, the same advantages and disadvantages apply to a webinar as a webcast. The major difference is that because of the interactivity and the expectation that attendees will actively participate in the session, there is a greater likelihood that they will attend.

A couple of other areas to consider

While we are on the subject of new technologies, there are a couple of other interesting areas to consider:

Learning through mobile devices

Learning almost anytime, anywhere has become a possibility with the increasing sophistication of mobile phones and tablet devices.

Mobile learning is a major topic in its own right, so we have deliberately excluded it from this guide. For more information on mobile learning, see the [Mobile Learning section](#) on our website or read our '*Getting Started with Mobile Learning Guide*'. You can download this guide via the link below – no sign up required:

<http://www.pacificblue.co.uk/getting-started-with-mobile-learning-guide>

Learning through wikis

Think of a wiki as an online library of information on a specific topic or topics written collaboratively by a group of people.

The learning could come through the process of collaboration and writing the content together. Alternatively, it could be that the wiki is written collaboratively by a group of experts on a specific topic with the idea that others can use it as a resource to learn more about this topic.

Note: at a given point, you could view a wiki as complete or finished, but one of its strengths is that typically it is a work in progress with more information being continuously added.

New-Look Blended Learning in Action

Example: current situation

Here is an example scenario for you to consider:

You teach introductory project management skills to about 70 people in your organisation each year, by running a 2-day classroom course 6 times.

The course runs for approximately 6-7 hours each day with about an hour's homework between day 1 and 2. It is delivered by a training provider with whom you have a long-standing, well-established relationship.

Your organisation is spread over three sites and attendees are drawn reasonably evenly from each site. You rotate the course location so that the need to travel is spread fairly across the organisation.

Typically, for each event, about 30% of attendees are on-site and are not doing any additional travel. About another 30% are able to travel to the course location each day, but are claiming travel expenses. The remaining 40% are traveling considerable distances and claim travel expenses, subsistence and the cost of 1 or 2 nights' accommodation.

The course is well-regarded by attendees. One of the many positive aspects of the course they frequently cite is the opportunity to meet with colleagues who are all new to project management. Informal contact and problem-sharing/solving often continues after the course.

Typical overall cost per course: £4,000 - £4,500
Approximate total cost in a given year: £27,000

The programme is too valuable and successful to stop, but costs need to be cut and the existing delivery model is no longer viable. Reluctantly you start to look at alternatives.

Example: considering the self-paced e-learning option

Estimates from external providers for developing the course into 6-7 hours of e-learning have come in at anywhere between £50,000 - £70,000. Although this is a high up-front cost, if you were to re-use the course at the same frequency as you deliver classroom training over 2-3 years you would make some significant savings.

But you recognise that the e-learning replacement course on its own, would not provide the same depth of learning. Some additional self-study or back-up would be required. You are also concerned about previous poor up-take and participation in e-learning programmes. Overall, you think the savings made would end up being a false economy.

Example: alternative blended learning programme

Your existing provider comes up with an outline for an alternative blended learning programme spread over 8 weeks, with formal follow-up at weeks 12, 16 and 20.

Because the programme would run over an extended period of time in short chunks, it makes sense to run two programmes a year with approximately 30-35 people per programme.

Continued on the next page...

New-Look Blended Learning in Action, Continued

Example: programme outline

Here's a high-level overview of what the training provider proposes:

Part 1: Covering key topics

Week	Event Type	Description	Length
1	Classroom	Kick off session to introduce and explain programme and cover introductory topics	3.5 hours
2	Webcast	New topic: presentation and questions via chat	30 minutes
2	Self-study	Follow-on self-study pack and homework assignment	30 minutes
3	Webinar	New topics: presentation, interactive exercises, questionnaire and discussion	60 minutes
4	Webinar	New topics: presentation, interactive exercises, and discussion	60 minutes

Part 2: Applying key topics to a case study

Week	Event Type	Description	Length
5	Webcast	Case study: introduction and assign case study teams; questions via chat	30 minutes
5	Self-study	Follow-on self-study pack and homework assignment	30 minutes
6	Webinar	Team work: attendee-led with trainer available as needed	60 minutes
7	Webinar	Team work: attendee-led with trainer available as needed	60 minutes
8	Webinar	Team work: attendee-led with trainer available as needed	60 minutes
8	Webinar	Case study presentations, wrap-up and introduction to wiki development work	60 minutes

Part 3: Wiki collaboration and follow-up

Week	Event Type	Description	Length
12	Webinar	Wiki development: progress review and feedback	60 minutes
16	Webinar	Wiki development: progress review and feedback	30 minutes
20	Webinar	Close and evaluation	30 minutes

Note: because of the larger numbers, there would be 3 streams of people per programme, 1 stream per site. This would result in the following number of events:

Event Type	Number
Classroom	3 events: 1 per stream
Webcasts	1 event each time for all 3 streams
Webinars	3 events each time: 1 per stream
Team work webinars	6 events each time: 2 per stream

New-Look Blended Learning in Action, Continued

Example: estimated costs and savings

Overall the estimated costs and savings are as follows:

Description	Classroom	Blended
Cost per course or programme	£4,500	£8,000
Cost for first year	£27,000	£24,000*
Cost for subsequent years	£27,000	£16,000

* Includes one-off cost of £8,000 for set up and re-purposing of existing course content.

Example: other advantages

Apart from the annual saving of £11,000, some of the other advantages identified are as follows:

- web and class events happen at scheduled times and are facilitated by a trainer
- follow-up and contact between attendees is now embedded in the programme
- knowledge and experience is being captured for future reference and future attendees
- a community of practice will likely develop around beginner project management skills

Example: a few things to keep in mind

There are also a couple of other important things to keep in mind:

- the need to monitor the wiki at regular intervals
- the need for early stage monitoring and follow-up of attendees while this new way of learning is bedding down

Other considerations

It's important to remember that this is only one example of how you might deliver the existing course as a blended learning solution. A couple of other ways that immediately spring to mind are:

- A whole day of classroom training followed by 4 webinars to complete the case study work
- A half-day of classroom training followed by 3 short pieces of self-paced e-learning, followed by a webcast to introduce the case study followed by 4 webinars to complete the case study.

The list could go on. This is the beauty of a blended learning approach – there are many ways to develop a programme.

New-Look Blended Learning: Advantage and Disadvantages

Overall conclusions

This page sums up some of the advantages and disadvantages and provides an overall conclusion about new-look blended learning.

What are some of the advantages of this approach?

Short, scheduled and facilitated

The learning events are scheduled and facilitated by an experienced trainer. The webcasts and webinars, in particular, are short and concise taking only a small amount of time out of the attendees' day.

No travel time or costs

No travel is necessary; indeed for the web events, as long as an attendee has a computer and internet connection and a phone or headphones/microphone, they can attend from almost anywhere.

Easier to measure and amend content as you go

Small incremental steps are easier to measure. If a programme of small learning events is not meeting the attendees' needs it is easier to amend it part way through.

Easy assimilation

One final, major advantage of spreading learning over an extended period is that it allows attendees to assimilate new material and topics more comfortably. This avoids the problem of the 'sheep dip' approach where all the focus is on a single event and the expectation is that this event will bring about the required change in skills or performance.

What are some of the disadvantages?

Technology can be intimidating

Anyone new to the technology can feel a little intimidated or perplexed by such a different approach. Even with the levels of interaction now possible, attending a web-based learning event can seem a strange, dislocating experience. This may not be confined to web 'newbies'. Sometimes, experienced 'webbies' can struggle.

Resistance from trainers

You may meet strong resistance from trainers who have side-stepped many of the technological changes of the last few years. (Okay, we confess, we still love our OHPs, but we've learnt to get over it!)

Potential poor attendance

As previously noted, turning up to a web-based event doesn't carry the weight or significance of attending a 'real world' event and so attendees may be tempted to bunk off or find an excuse not to attend.

Not suitable for all scenarios

If you are in a hurry and need to get a significant amount of complex training done to a tight deadline, then in the first instance, classroom training may be the only viable solution.

What conclusions can we draw?

In conclusion, on their own, these new approaches to learning are not perfect, but they combine some of the familiar aspects of class-based learning with some virtual world equivalents of classroom techniques.

If thoughtfully combined with more familiar approaches, they provide a remarkably efficient, refreshing and cost-effective approach to learning.

Next steps...

Blended learning can be a great way to provide varied, effective, spaced learning and practice.

There has been a good deal of research carried out in recent years into the benefits of spacing learning and practice versus a more traditional 'single hit'.

All the evidence points to spaced learning being significantly more effective.

If you want your next outsourced development project to be an effective, success-driven blended approach, then our thirty-minute phone consultation is an ideal starting point.

During this consulting session, we will work with you to:

- Understand and define your learning goals
- Identify how to best align those goals with your learners and their needs, and
- Suggest the best mix of mediums to use for a successful blended approach.

To arrange a suitable time for a phone consultation or just to talk through your requirement informally,

send us an email at: enquiry@pacificblue.co.uk

or

call us on: **0845 122 7102**, Monday to Friday 9.30 - 6.00.