

### **So, what is blended learning?**

Well, it's exactly what the name supposes – a blend or mix of the approaches that can be used to design a learning experience. Blends are often used to bring together a range of 'opposites', approaches to learning that at first glance may not sit easily with each other but can nonetheless be used to create a balanced, more varied, learning experience.

But let's be clear at the outset. Blending learning is really a very strange concept, well at least to a 'learning person' like myself and I'm sure to many of you reading this paper. It's like trying to define or name a phenomenon that's been practiced over many, many years. Learning is always blended. Every primary school classroom, every training event, no matter what the subject, carries a blend of learning. In a formal learning situation, like at school, we might be asked to read something (a passage from a paper, or a book chapter, maybe some screens of text). We then listen to a teacher explain a concept; and talk with another learner, perhaps posing and answering a question or two. We might also write something – no, we ALWAYS write something (something's got to be assessed!) - maybe a solution to a problem, maybe answers to a MCQ, maybe as notes for reflection at a later date.

This is a mix, a blend. Nothing new in any of this. But it just seems to be that in terms of elearning we are now faced with making the notion of blending learning explicit, rather than leaving it unsaid. I guess there's a very good reason for this and it lies in the notions of place, proximity and technology, that elearning presents.

With elearning technologies enabling learners to learn at a distance, from each other and from a teacher, we need to re-address the value of bringing learners together in a single place and time, say a classroom, strange as that might seem. More than this, we need to think about this value and compare it to value for learners in communicating online, both asynchronously (email, forums) and synchronously (chat, VoIP), and consider how such communication is different when in the immediacy of a physical space, like a classroom.

The truth in all this of course, is that there is value in most things. And the precise blend of online and classroom, or face-to-face as it is often referred, has to account for both context and opportunity. The blend or mix will differ accordingly. In fact, and this might be a little confusing to state up-front, the actual blend of learning, where ever possible, is best made not by the teacher or learning designer but by the learner. Learners all learn differently. They have different needs, different contexts, different predispositions, different approaches to learning. And to make things even more complex, learners exhibit changing characteristics – their needs, contexts, approaches, etc., change with circumstance, with maturity, with experience. So it's much more effective to enable learners to make the choice about blend or mix.

What does this mean for the practical purpose of designing a learning or elearning experience? Well, in the first place it might be necessary to run both online AND face-to-face sessions; to deliver opportunities to learn collaboratively AND independently; to deliver some content in the form of an exposition or 'lecture' AND to provide the same content in ways which learners can discover it for themselves, in situ of a problem-solving exercise, for example.

No one said blending learning was going to be easy! But for the moment, let's get back to some of the more fundamental concepts.

### **A basic blend**

Face-to-face and online are two approaches to the use of 'place' in elearning. In practice this means bringing learners together in classrooms as well as online – mixing the learning experience so that some of it is in a classroom and some of it is delivered online. The theory here is that the same learners tend to work in each of these 'places' differently, so the more vocal and 'socially forward' (?) of learners can be expected to take central stage in the immediacy and physicality of classrooms; whilst the online component provides a platform for more considered and perhaps more tentative learners to make their contribution. In this way, the two different senses of 'place' (online and classroom) maximise the effectiveness of the learning experience across all learners.

More than this of course, some content is best considered in classrooms - usually tacit knowledge, instructor-led explanations and Q&A (chat) sessions. Whilst other parts of the learning experience are better engaged online – activities that are learner centred, such as reflective discussions and problem-based learning, where solutions need to be found to complex questions.

Other blends of the elearning experience can be created from mixing deliberate and incidental approaches to learning; and using both individualised and collaborative activities to engage learners.

More of these blends are discussed below.

### **Some more basic blends**

#### *Deliberate vs. Incidental*

Learning can be both deliberate (often referred to as formal) and incidental (informal). Learning that results in an enlightened perspective and improved performance is often considered to occur as a result of at least some incidental learning experiences. Incidental learning occurs when learners are not being 'fed' information, when they have opportunities to explore and to follow their own pathways and when they engage with other learners. Incidental learning is driven by the learner and is not pre-defined; deliberate learning is driven by a teacher or a learning designer and often follows encourages or forces the learner along a single path, to a known answer.

#### *Individualised vs. Collaborative*

Learning has been thought, at least until quite recently, to have been an individual phenomenon – learning goes on in a person's head. In fact we now know that learning is more often than not, a social experience. People learn from each other. And more importantly, people learn *with* each other by conversing, explaining, critiquing, negotiating, questioning. Put people in a group, whether online or face-to-face, and they will learn faster and more effectively (better retaining and using what they learn) than on their own. More importantly, they learn differently, creating a shared understanding that is deeper and more robust than a single, individual, understanding.

#### *Face to Face vs. Online*

With the advent of technology learning can now be engineered to occur online, so that individuals interact with content and with a teacher or facilitator, and of course with each other, in an online 'space'. These interactions can occur both synchronously (i.e. immediately) and asynchronously (over time). The anthesis of online, is of course, face-

to-face or classroom based learning – where learners interact in person with others. Its perhaps no surprise that with more traditional pedagogies (where the teacher is centre-stage, imparting his knowledge to the learner), learners can feel more isolated in classrooms than online. Equally, the economics of bringing learners together face-to-face (over distance) can simply be prohibitive.

### *Interactive vs. Participative*

We now know that meaningful learning, learning that is more effective than not, is participative. Learning needs to centre on learners participating in their learning experience, not simply interacting with the experience, making choices from pre-canned options. There are a variety of forms of participation in elearning but in the better variants, participation will involve learners in constructing a solution to a problem - their own solution (understanding) - rather than being led towards a single, 'known', solution or truth. Participative learning design encourages and values learners' inputs, providing digital tools for learners to comment, annotate, critique, explain. Interaction is all about 'choosing and using' from pre-canned content. Participation is all about the learner contributing, personalising their experience, demonstrating understanding. This is not to say that interactive is bad and participative is good – but that there is room for both in any learning design. And a good rule of thumb is that the more complex the knowledge, the more important it is to engage learners with participative approaches to learning design.

### *Adaptive vs. Structured*

Learners learn differently. Different styles and approaches; different starting points and finishing points; different outcomes; and different rates of learning. Untidy, yes. But realistic. If learners are presented only with a single type of learning experience, without enabling them to respond in ways that suit them, differently, that experience will at best meet the requirements and preferences of only a very few. Unfortunately, as a learning designer or a facilitator you may never be any the wiser: learners will struggle through regardless, or even fail. And its much easier to blame the learner than the design of the learning experience. Highly structured approaches to learning suits highly structured knowledge that doesn't have any 'lose ends'. But more often than not, knowledge is not like that. Solutions to real-world problems more often than not require a complexity of thinking, and can't be resolved by applying a simplistic proposition or rule. Good learning design then, as with good teaching, should provide for both adaptive and structured learning to take shape.

### *Conclusion*

The precise blend of learning in any single learning instance, has to be designed to account for the types of knowledge (simplified vs. complex, conceptual vs. propositional) being engaged, the nature and characteristics of the learners (there is no point in putting the experience online, if learners do not have the skills or experience to interact online) and the skills of the learning designer to create learning experiences that are participative and not just interactive.

Successful blends of learning are so much more than 'a pinch of this, and a little bit of that'. And its not just anyone that you should trust to blend your learning experience. Unless it is the learner. For some strange reason, the learner always chooses the blend that is right for them. If they are given the chance, that is.