

Adult Learning and the Blended Approach

Beyond Textbooks Online

By Rebecca Westphal

The benefits of online learning, or e-learning, have long been acknowledged by those in the training industry. Conducting training over the Internet makes learning accessible in a way never before possible. Because the training facilitator for online learning, the computer, is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, students – even those who cannot travel to conventional areas of training or afford time away from the workplace – can complete their training at a time and place most convenient to them and most personally conducive to learning. With a focus on self-directed and self-motivated study, online learning is perfect for adult learners in our busy organizations who need that freedom in order to achieve the best educational benefits.

But is online learning enough? Can we achieve more from our training processes than currently being provided by online learning alone? At HRworkbench®, we believe that it takes more than online learning to produce changes in behavior; and let's face it, in the organizational context, without behavior change, training is worthless. As Stephen Lieb (*Principles of Adult Learning*: 1991) says, the desired outcome of training is “the ability to *use* the information taught in the course but in a new setting.” (Emphasis added.) For this kind of implementation-focused training, online learning is vital, but is only one piece of the puzzle in a bigger picture: blended learning.

As its name implies, blended learning “blends” a number of different training delivery mechanisms to create an entire training package. It involves integrating a number of strategies and methods that address the unique and varied learning styles of adults. At HRworkbench these different components can include:

- **Assessment/Profiling (Online)** Link 360-degree questionnaires or Psychometric Assessments directly to the learning. Benchmark performance prior to learning and test for learning and knowledge transfer at program end.
- **Goal Setting (Online)** Students are asked to set learning goals based on their Assessment Profile or on the curriculum content.
- **CFL (Online)** Deliver theory and information online to ensure consistency of message. Incorporate Case Study Material, interactive questioning and testing of knowledge transfer - all online.
- **Assignments (Offline as an individual)** Ensure the learning is translated back to the individual's workplace.
- **Projects (Offline as an individual)** Interpret the learning in terms of real world experience, or compare how 'we do it' to how 'others do it'.
- **Discussion Groups (Offline as part of a group)** Foster shared learning with self managed, or facilitated, workplace-centred learning groups.
- **Training Days (Offline as part of a group)** Practice skills and understanding in the risk-free environment of the real classroom. Accredited facilitators ensure the learning is directed, focused and on-track.

One of the reasons this “blend” is so effective is that people learn differently. Some people like to read textbooks, some need visual imagery, some like to hear their learning, others need to write things down before it sinks in, and yet others need to act things out. Blended Learning attempts to ensure that the curriculum messages are delivered in a variety of ways so that all learning styles are catered for, thus maximising the effectiveness of the training for the widest possible group of trainees.

However, blended learning provides greater benefits than just reaching a wide audience. By combining the elements above in one training package, blended learning addresses the key principles of adult learning, that is, adult learners:

1. Are self-directed
2. Are practical, so want learning to be relevant to their work/responsibilities
3. Enjoy active learning

(Stephen Lieb, *Principles of Adult Learning*: 1991; Bruce B. Baenziger, *An Evaluation of Training Classes Provided to County Child Welfare Workers*: 1998)

1. Adult Learners are Self-Directed

Adult learners tend to be busy and most often, they do not have the time to dedicate themselves to full-time study. They have jobs, and families, and responsibilities. For these people, the minimal face-to-face interaction of blended learning means that they can choose to learn when and where they like. If they do not feel like learning on a certain day, they do not have to, and there are no penalties.

Adult learners also have the maturity to make their own decisions about learning, and appreciate having that maturity recognised. CFL Modules, Assignments, Projects, and Group Discussions in blended learning all require the participants to take control of the learning experience and either run learning activities themselves or self-motivate to achieve the outcomes that will allow them to move ahead. This gives the participants a sense of ownership of their learning and further motivates them because they are the ones steering the process.

Through each of these learning activities, participants are encouraged to draw their own conclusions about the learning. CFL Modules ask questions and require participants to type in their ideas and then compare these to generally accepted theory, while Assignments, Projects, and Group Discussions help participants generate their own ideas by asking them to apply the learning within the context of their own experiences. Participants can take each activity delivered in the curriculum and put it into practice and then analyse and debate the success or otherwise before they move onto the next activity.

However, while effective blended learning enables participants to direct their own learning, it doesn't leave them stranded. In "Bench" curricula, there is always a facilitator available to contact to discuss problems, understanding, or new ideas.

2. Adult Learners Are Practical

While there are some theoretical learners out there, many adults do not want to simply learn for the sake of learning. Instead, they want to know why they are learning and how it will benefit them. They want learning to be relevant to their needs and their experiences.

The first step in ensuring learning is practical and sets deliverables is to assess participants' current skills/behaviours. As Richard Hodge and Lou Schachter from The Learning Company say (*What Creates Behavioural Change? Measurable performance gains come from integrating the full range of learning components*: 2002), "An assessment establishes the starting point and the path to the desired outcome." That is, by measuring the desired skills/behaviors required for a job, the gaps discovered in assessment show you where you need to go and what you need to learn in order to fill the gaps. From the outset, participants know why the training is relevant and how it is going to impact on their current role. By re-assessing the same skills/behaviors at the end of training, participants can measure their improvement and see how the training benefited their situation.

The next step is to set goals. These goals should be specific, instead of general, and relevant to the learner's situation. Goal Setting activities in HRworkbench curricula require participants to enter both their goals for the curriculum as well as a target date for achieving each goal. Participants can change and update their goals until they are happy that they accurately represent the improvements they need to make, and then, once goals are confirmed, can come back and

check their progress at any time. This provides a focus for the participants and helps to ensure that theory is translated into action in the workplace.

The inclusion of Assignments in blended learning also helps to provide learning that moves beyond textbooks online, and provide practical training. Assignments can be customised to the organisational culture and working environment of the participant so that they apply what they are learning in training to their job, and are assessed on this ability.

The combination of these activities ensures that the learning keeps returning to real situations in the lives of the participants so that they can continually see its relevance and gauge their own improvement.

3. Adult Learners Enjoy Active Learning

In their research about adult learning, Zemke and Zemke (1981 and 1995) discovered that adults are far more likely to retain knowledge and skills if they can apply the skills immediately (Bruce B. Baenziger, *An Evaluation of Training Classes Provided to County Child Welfare Workers*: 1998). Without the chance to put their skills into practice after learning, adults are likely to lose those skills.

The main way active learning is achieved in blended learning is through the training days. These training days usually include case studies and simulations where participants act out the skills they have learnt. They are given feedback about their actions and skills, but in a constructive fashion that reinforces positive behavior.

The advantage of having periodic, rather than full-time, face-to-face interaction is that when participants do arrive to workshops after learning theory online is that they are all at the same level of understanding - valuable facilitator time does not have to be wasted in getting all participants to the same point. Rather, the facilitator can concentrate on using the workshops as areas for skill development; practising skills, debating success and failures with colleagues, observing how others “do-it”. The online delivery of theory also ensures that each participant is given exactly the same information as their colleagues – the message is consistent regardless of when they complete the curriculum.

A combination of activity types produces the most effective results in adult learning, because adult learners themselves require a combination of things from their training. While online learning is a key aspect in best practice for adult learning (i.e. it provides a vehicle that participants can drive themselves to keep the learning self-directed), by itself, it will not provide for all of the needs of adult learners.

Perhaps the best way to emphasise this point is to quote the research of experts in the field. Allison Rossett, Felicia Douglass, and Rebecca V. Frazee from Learning Circuits (*Strategies for Building Blended Learning*: <http://www.learningcircuits.org/2003/jul2003/rossett.htm>) share the following research:

“A study by Peter Dean and his colleagues found that providing several linked options for learners, in addition to classroom training, increased what they learned. In 2002, Harvard Business School faculty DeLacey and Leonard reported that students not only learned more when online sessions were added to traditional courses, but student interaction and satisfaction improved as well. Thomson and NETg released a [2003 white paper](#) that reported speedier performance on real-world tasks by people who learned through a blended strategy—faster than those studying through e-learning alone.”

One thing seems clear; the solutions for adult learning are not black and white, because people themselves do not fall into such categories. A blended learning approach to training allows for the shades of grey by opening up a wide range of learning situations and addressing the different needs of adults. Talk to us about how you can use our current blended learning programs, or customised blended learning to produce measurable changes in behaviour for your clients.

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