

BEYOND THE BLEND

Getting Learning & Development Right

By Charles Jennings



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Foreword



Technology has changed how we deliver learning and development (L&D), opening up new channels and possibilities for when, where and how people develop their knowledge and experience. So far, it has been combining learning content with technology within organisations that has enabled employers to deliver learning that is responsive to both organisational and staff needs.

But high-quality learning in the workplace is about more than technology. Today's challenge for organisations and learning professionals is to design effective L&D that fully utilises the capabilities of technology, combined with work-based activities and experiences, to achieve a real and lasting impact on performance in the workplace. In other words, we need to shift some of the focus away from the learning 'inputs' and towards learning and performance 'outcomes'.

This white paper by Charles Jennings, a leading thinker and practitioner in learning, development and performance, looks at where technology has brought L&D and considers its potential for now and the future. He looks particularly at blended learning and what needs to change, exploring how learning professionals can increase their skills and understanding to harness technology and expertise in a way that increases the impact, efficiency and return on investment of L&D.

I hope that you find the insights and recommendations in this paper valuable. As an organisation that has both used and led innovations in technology and teaching to deliver learning to individuals and employers for over 40 years, we welcome the opportunity to contribute to the thinking on ways to deliver learning with greater impact.

Mike Dutton, Executive Director, The Open University

Abstract

Technology has a big role to play in most modern learning and development strategies, but the effectiveness, impact and success of these strategies is almost always due to factors beyond technology. Without robust design principles and capable and experienced professionals who know how to harness the technology and exploit the 'best', then technology offers little. Blended learning is a start, but we need to move 'beyond the blend'.

The 'Blend'

"I can't help reading 'blended learning' as 'we can't make up our mind learning. We are not sure which type of learning to use so we will use lots and hope that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts ... blended learning gave way to 'blurred learning'" (Morrison.D., 2003)

'Blending' learning is a widely used term by HR and learning and development professionals to describe how they approach the design and delivery of learning solutions. Yet if you ask two to describe what it means to each and you are likely to receive different answers.

The term 'blended learning' first appeared in the late-90s when web-based educational solutions started to become more widely used and were integrated one way or another with face-to-face methods.

However, we need to remember that this blending was not new. The concept has been around for a long time. Apprenticeship training has 'blended' learning for centuries and continues in much the same way to this day. A period of formal instruction for apprentices is woven into on-the-job learning where the apprentice learns at the side of an expert. Instructional design and 'directed' learning is combined with experiential and self-directed learning.

The rise of the correspondence schools in Europe in the 1840s also saw blending used in a structured way. In the 1920s and 1930s 'blended' was called supervised correspondence study and in use across many US States and elsewhere as means of as a means of enriching the curriculum¹.

More recently in Higher Education the use of blended learning has grown rapidly with predictions over the past few years that it would become the 'new traditional model'² or the 'new normal'³ in course delivery⁴.

Bielawski and Metcalfe⁵ take an extended view of blending. Their 'Blended Learning' book is subtitled 'Integrating knowledge, performance support and online learning' and their recommended blend is between elearning, knowledge management and

¹Cyr, F.W. and Baier, R.M. Report on Conference on supervised correspondence study to formulate policies regarding its use as a practical means of enriching the curriculum of American secondary schools: held at Teachers college, Columbia university, New York city, August 8, 9, 10, 1934

²Ross, B., & Gage, K. (2006). Global perspectives on blended learning: Insight from WebCT and our customers in higher education. In C.J. Bonk & C.R. Graham (Eds.), Handbook of blended learning: Global perspectives, local designs (pp. 155-168). San Francisco, CA: Pfeiffer.

³Norberg, A., Dziuban, C.D., & Moskal, P.D. (2011). A time-based blended learning model. On the Horizon, 19 (3), 207-216. doi:10.1108/10748121111163913

⁴Reported in: Handbook of Distance Education: Graham, C. R. (2013). Emerging practice and research in blended learning In M. G. Moore (Ed.), Handbook of distance education (3rd ed., pp. 333-350) New York, NY: Routledge.

⁵Bielawski, L. and Metcalf, D. (2002) Blended eLearning

performance support. This is a significant advance on early simple classroom-and-elearning mixes.

In recent years, thinking and practice around blended learning has moved beyond the simple two-part mix of classroom and online. Professor James Fleck previously at the Open University Business School described⁶ a general 'developmental dynamic' of blended learning that has occurred as more and more pedagogic rigour has been applied to blending together with enabling technology. Fleck's models emerge from [1] correspondence and broadcast, to; [2] purpose-designed quality distance education, and on to; [3] practice-based (incorporating work tasks), and finally to; [4] learning community-based blending.

Fleck makes the key point in his work that although technology has become an important part of the blend, success or failure depends on the minutiae of the design - on how the technology is used - rather than on the technology itself.

⁶Fleck, James (2012). Blended learning and learning communities: opportunities and challenges. *Journal of Management Development*, 31(4) pp. 398-411.

Technology and the 'Blend'

There is no doubt that blended learning as we see it today – with the combination of a range of channels of delivery almost always involving technology – has emerged on the back of the technology revolution. Blending provides the flexibility and timeliness that is needed in today's fast-paced world.

Technology has also helped us break the 'richness/reach trade-off'. The technology and communications revolution has allowed us to support rich learning experiences and, at the same time, to do so irrespective of location of teacher and learner (thus breaking the trade-off between the ability to either offer rich learning in face-to-face environments or poorer learning to a larger group who are spread more widely).

However, this has only solved part of the puzzle. It is clear we need to move 'beyond the blend'.

The effective support of high quality learning in the new working environment requires more than technology. The heavy lifting needs to be done by experienced and qualified people who can support and, where required, design rich and effective learning experiences.

These qualified and experienced professionals know how to make careful and expert use of tools of the trade. They know how to use analytics to monitor learner behaviour and development. They know that assessment is not only about checking progress and the standard of achievement; it's also about enabling the learners to express their learning, too⁸. Good assessment determines the points of success and failure early and allows timely interventions to help keep people on track and learning efficiently and effectively.

The move 'beyond the blend' requires not only solid pedagogical expertise; it also requires a mindset shift from one focused solely on learning to one focused primarily on performance.

This also means that the design process for structured learning needs to expand and re-align to work 'outside-in' – starting with identification of the performance outputs and designing backwards from there. This is the only way well-designed and effective structured learning solutions can be built.

⁷Evans, Philip and Wurster, Thomas *Blown to Bits: How the New Economics of Information Transforms Strategy*. 1999

⁸Wheeler, S. (2015) *Learning with 'e's*. Crown House. ISBN: 1845909399

Thoughtful Design for Performance

Research tells us that people generally learn best when their learning and their work are aligned. Learning integrated with work will produce better results in terms of behaviour change and performance improvement than when learning is entirely separated from work.

A study carried out by the Corporate Executive Board⁹ reported on-the-job learning to have three times greater impact on performance improvement than pure formal training programs. The same study found employees with high exposure to on-the-job learning activities were more than two-and-a-half times more engaged than those who had no exposure to on-the-job learning. 'High exposure' in this study was defined as being engaged in '11 or more on-the-job learning activities during the last month'.

If we bring together on-the-job learning activities with well-designed structured learning we are onto a winning formula. However this requires the application of high levels of thoughtful design and experience.

This thoughtful design usually requires deep expertise focused on performance outputs and an understanding of not only what people need to learn, but how they best learn and the most effective ways in which they can be supported to learn.

⁹Learning and Development Roundtable (2009). On-the-Job Learning Survey. LDR is a division of the Corporate Executive Board. Washington, DC: Author.

Thoughtful Design in Practice

A very good example of the challenges that can be overcome by thoughtful design is the large-scale multi-channel NHS Leadership Academy¹⁰.

This initiative arose as a response to the need for new approaches and more effective development for leaders and emerging leaders of all backgrounds and experiences across this massive organisation with a workforce in excess of 1.6m people. Target groups include doctors, nurses, allied health professionals, healthcare scientists, HR, and finance staff.

The NHS Leadership Academy has now begun offering a range of schemes and leading edge programmes supported by thoughtful design and the use of leading-edge technology to achieve the migration from predominantly face-to-face structured learning to predominantly rich resource-based online learning.

To accomplish this the NHS has brought together leading academic institutions and specialist commercial providers; The Open University and the Hay Group and others for the large-scale foundation programmes to be offered to many tens of thousands of NHS staff aspiring to roles which involve leading others; and Harvard University, Manchester Business School, Birmingham University, KPMG and providers such as Microsoft, BT and specialist elearning companies such as LEO for the mid-level and senior level programmes.

Rich blended learning architectures have been collaboratively designed. Virtual campuses and a wide range of learning activities and 'e-assets' have been created that include game-based learning, simulations, mobile and social learning, performance support suites, online coaching and other designs that encourage and support participants to read, test, ask, watch, play, explore, find, listen, solve, discuss, share and touch. The academic institutions offer group and individual tutorials, co-ordinate action learning sets, and manage assignments and meaningful assessment. There is rich use of techniques such as video walls, vox pops, learner produced content, leadership mobile apps, online reference libraries and collaborative learning.

¹⁰ <http://www.leadershipacademy.nhs.uk>

New Skills and Roles Beyond the Blend

Comprehensive design and mindsets are required to support the effective development of programmes such as those in the NHS Leadership Academy. These designs require new skills and, in many cases, new roles for learning professionals.

Systems design for architecting solutions such as these requires systems thinking beyond traditional training design. A 'performance mindset' is needed. Simple instructional design and simplistic 4-level and similar measurement approaches are simply not fit for task.

Roles such as the 'performance architect'¹¹ are required to design effective solutions to address today's complex performance problems. The performance architect role stretches beyond traditional instructional design. Performance design is carried out 'outside in' – by examining desired performance outcomes and then designing 'with the 100' in mind; in other words, designing for structured, social and experiential development.

High performers demonstrate five common characteristics in their learning that allow them to reach the heights:

1. They have usually mastered the basics in a structured way
2. They spend time in guided practice, often with a coach (or coaches)
3. They are embedded in their professional network with mentors and colleagues who they can call on when they need to overcome a performance problem
4. They have some form of performance support at their fingertips – this may be access to real-time data/information or simply knowing who to call on for support
5. They have devoted many hours to apply their learned skills in context. They apply their learning.

¹¹The 'performance architect' is one of five new roles described in a new book by Arets, Heijnen and Jennings. The others are performance detective, performance master builder, performance game changer, and performance tracker. Dutch version: 702010 naar 100% performance. (2015). Sutler Media. ISBN: 978-90-8239780-2. English version due for publication November 2015.

If each of these dimensions is to be exploited and supported for maximum impact then the expertise of learning and development professionals inevitably needs to encompass the skills and experience to support each dimension and not only a subset.

The major factor for producing effective learning and moving beyond a simple mixing of learning channels is the availability of professionals who have expertise in identifying problems where under-performance is a factor, or where there is a need for improved knowledge and skill to deliver greater results, and constructing solutions to meet these needs.

Innovative learning and performance solutions require specialist capabilities. Learning and development teams may possess some of these but almost inevitably they will need to partner with external specialist learning organisations whose experience is likely to be both wider and deeper and whose experience in 'designing for outcomes' and expertise in developing quality materials can bring new solutions to the table.

Moving Beyond the Blend with Practice, Networking, Performance Support, Coaching and Reflection

'Directed learning' is a term to describe the process of developing learning content and experiences in an intentional way. Directed learning is managed by learning and development professionals for others. Directed learning usually manifests itself in the form of classroom events or programmes, or elearning modules or courses combined with other content-centric learning techniques.

Most blended learning practices emerged from directed learning mindsets. Learning professionals gather sets of learning objectives and then design, develop and deliver learning solutions.

Directed learning, although sometimes important, is rarely sufficient to support the workforce to build high performance – at individual, team or organisation level.

The focus of the Learning and Development function needs to move beyond directed and blended learning and towards identifying opportunities to exploit the workplace as a sandbox for a stream of continuous learning. Learning and work are merging and, for many of us, learning is becoming the daily work.

Learning in the workplace inevitably involves practice (sometimes guided and supported practice), networking with colleagues and others, having access to resources at our fingertips, coaching and reflection. Together these constitute some of the most powerful learning approaches available.

Beyond the blend is a wealth of learning and development opportunities. To reach them requires creative and innovative thinking and a cohort of expertise and skill. This almost invariably requires partnering with others.

Summary

We are entering a new era of work and learning where speed and agility are critical and where workforce capability needs to be built and refreshed both regularly and frequently.

In this new world, organisations need to look for innovative learning, performance design and partnerships above everything else.

Technology is important, but not the answer in itself. Thoughtful design is an essential ingredient as is a new mindset that views learning 'inside out' – from performance to learning – as a means to help people change their behaviours, develop their capabilities, and improve their performance.

About The Open University

Supporting L&D through academic expertise and learning and technology know-how

For more than 40 years, The Open University (OU) has led the way in online learning, delivering education to individuals and workplace learning and development solutions to employers.

Specialising in developing high-quality learning materials, based on rigorous research and industry insight, the OU combines academic excellence with technological knowledge and expertise to deliver truly engaging, flexible and results-driven learning solutions.

A focus on organisational and learner success

The OU's expertise and global reach mean it is equipped to deliver consistent learning at scale and to diverse and dispersed workforces, developing workplace learning that enhances the performance of busy working people. With an extensive and advanced use of learning analytics in course design, the OU maximises student success and therefore the return on learning investment.

That's why over 1,300 employers, including IBM, BT, UNISON and Swiss Foster Care, choose the OU to support their ongoing learning and development needs.

"The Open University has such a good track record in delivering really engaging online learning processes."

Chris Lake, Head of Professional Development, NHS Leadership Academy

Tailoring learning to your organisation

The OU offers both off-the-shelf and tailored learning solutions to suit organisational needs. Learning content is designed to have positive impacts for organisations and modules can be hand-picked to create a learning pathway that benefits the individual as much as the business, through the option to lead to accreditation.

By enabling staff to study flexibly and remain in the workplace, they are able to apply their knowledge immediately within their work environment, delivering an immediate return on investment for the organisation. In addition, modules and courses can be tailored to incorporate work-based projects specific to organisations, creating the benefits of real-time organisational change.

“From the outset what impressed us was that the OU was keen to ensure that the solution was right for Acas. At an early stage the team visited the Helpline and listened to calls to understand first-hand the complexities of working as an adviser.”

Chris Bean, Senior Learning and Development Manager at Acas

Contact the OU

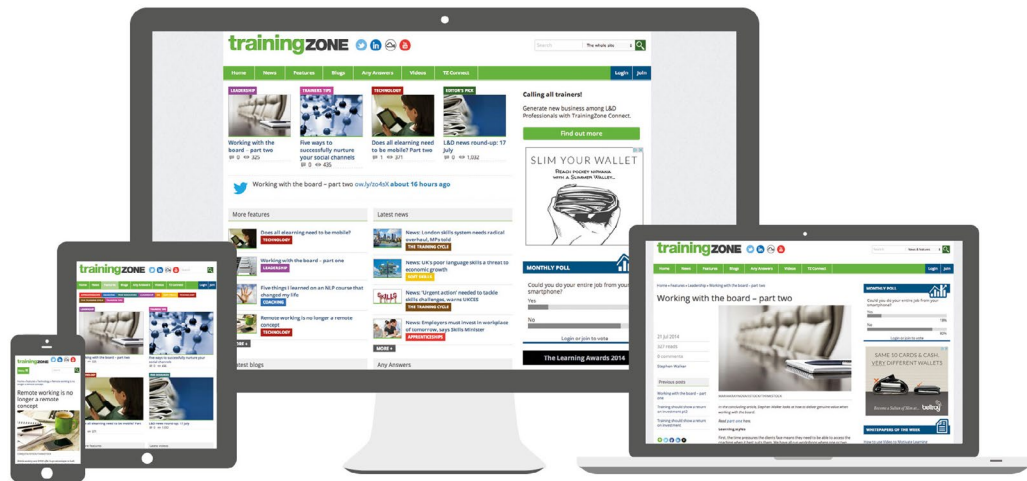
If you would like to find out more about how The Open University can work with you, call +44 (0)300 303 0122 or email do-business@open.ac.uk to talk to a member of the account team.

If you are interested in exploring further, you will be assigned an account manager to work closely with you, under no obligation, to identify your exact requirements and develop an appropriate learning solution. The OU's strong account management is valued by its clients and, coupled with their ability to create positive organisational impacts, will enable you to deliver L&D programmes that have real impact.

Trends in learning

Download The Open University's [Trends in Learning](#), to see the latest innovations in learning and how they could be deployed in your L&D strategies and programmes.

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