Section two

Testing the case for blended learning

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In section one, I described what I thought blended learning was all about and attempted to handle some of the more common objections raised by its detractors. I also diverted a little off the path to explore what 'good learning' might actually look like, because only when this is clear in our minds can we judge whether blending learning methods actually help us to achieve this goal.

In section two, I attempt an analysis of three broad-brush approaches – the classroom, the computer and on-job instruction – which, ironically, are not only common ingredients in a blended solution, they also represent blended learning's main competitors, when they are employed on a stand-alone basis. As a result, I hope to prove that, however strong these competitors may seem when used for the right purpose, with the right audience and at the right time, each has fatal flaws which renders them ineffective or inefficient as universal solutions. The longer, the more ambitious or the more complex a training programme becomes, the stronger the argument for adopting a blended approach. Let's see.

Why classrooms aren't enough

Even with the slow but determined growth of e-learning, the overwhelming majority of all formal, off-job training that is carried out in the workplace takes place in classrooms; this after most students have experienced 10 to 20 years of almost entirely classroom-based education. Unless teachers and trainers are all fools, which is unlikely, there must be some pretty good reasons why the classroom is so dominant. Here's a few. First and foremost, the classroom is convenient – it gathers learners together away from distractions (which in the case of adults means their jobs, but for children means opportunities for annoying adults and generally being naughty), under the guidance of a single minder, also known as a teacher, trainer or whatever. Because of the fiddle involved in gathering learners in one place (school runs, train journeys, flights, etc.), classroom sessions are traditionally measured in days rather than hours. The block-booking of learning time helps both parents/managers and learners to plan ahead. It also makes for easy administration for those people who have to book people on courses and track their progress.

The collective nature of classroom learning has other advantages. Purely economically, the bigger the class, the greater the efficiencies over one-to-one learning, albeit at the expense of individual attention. More importantly – and assuming the event

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doesn't become overly competitive – learners like being with each other. They value the potential for friendship, support and shared experience. The show-offs gain an audience. The meek can sit at the back and avoid eye contact with the trainer.

The strengths of classroom education – learning in groups, away from the work environment, at pre-determined times and for fixed periods – are, of course, also the weaknesses. The problem with groups is that they are actually a collection of individuals, with different work priorities, different starting points in terms of knowledge, skills and attitudes, and different preferences when it comes to how they learn. It is impossible to design a classroom session which, in the amount of time likely to be available, fully satisfies the needs of every participant. This difficulty is most apparent when the objective is to impart knowledge – while one person is struggling to keep up, another is twiddling their thumbs; while one is captivated by a subject that is highly relevant to their work, another is eagerly awaiting a change of topic. This is frustrating for participants; it's also highly inefficient, which is why self-study methods are typically 50 percent faster.

When the objectives become more ambitious than simply imparting knowledge, groups have more to offer. Debate and discussion can help develop understanding and influence attitudes; case studies and other group exercises can foster cognitive skills; role-plays provide an opportunity to practise interpersonal skills. While this interaction can be accomplished online, it is unlikely to be so easy to administer or

facilitate. Having said this, it is important to recognise that activities carried out in the classroom are not the real thing. Working with a group on a marketing case study is not the same thing as working alone, late into the night on a real marketing campaign. Role-playing a sales call takes you only so far in preparing you to face a real customer. And many skills simply cannot be simulated in the classroom, because of the physical limitations of the space.

The other difficulty with the classroom is the necessity to gather with like-minded learners at the same place and at the same time, for a scheduled event. This requires you to travel to the event, perhaps even to stay overnight. It requires you to wait until the event is next scheduled to run, even though your needs may be urgent. It also requires you to do all your learning in a single block, when this may be more effectively – and sometimes more conveniently – handled in small chunks. And, perhaps most importantly of all, it requires you to make all the running in transferring what you have learned to the work environment. It treats learning as an event, an episode, rather than as a natural element of all working life. Events, whether they are classroom courses, concerts, plays, TV programmes or football matches, can change people's lives. More typically they are appreciated at the time, and then all too quickly forgotten.

Why computers aren't enough

When any trainer is first introduced to the concept of e-learning, they are likely to come up with the same key questions. What exactly is e-learning, and when should I use it? The first question is harder to answer than it sounds, because you have to explain all the ways that computer networks can facilitate learning, by providing learners with access to materials, to tutors and other learners. The answer to the first question then makes the second that much harder. Each form of e-learning has its own unique features and benefits, and hence its own place in the design of online and blended solutions. Nevertheless, if the trainer sticks with it, they will get to see how e-learning in its various forms can make a contribution, particularly in the teaching of knowledge – of facts, concepts, rules, principles, processes and procedures. When it comes to skills, they don't get it.

Skills are important in training because very few of us get paid for what we know; we are employed because of what we can do. It's not enough to know 'that', we have

to know 'how'. If the emphasis in education is 80:20 in favour of knowing 'that', in training the priorities are reversed. So, good question, can computers really help us to learn skills? The answer, of course, is that it all depends.

Skills are rarely taught in isolation. There's typically a sequence starting with (1) the imparting of some basic supporting information, followed by (2) some sort of demonstration of the skill, then (3) the practice of that skill by the learner (ideally in a safe environment and with objective feedback), all culminating in (4) the application of the skill in the real work environment. I don't think anyone would argue that computers can help in the first step, but then that's again just a question of providing knowledge. They certainly could assist in the second, because almost any skill can be demonstrated using graphics, animation, audio or video, which, thanks to broadband,

we blend because we want our learners to achieve the best results

are all now readily available to us online. Computers might also be able to help at stage three, in providing practice with feedback, but here it depends on the type of skill.

Some skills are essentially cognitive, involving problem-solving, planning and decision-making; and in a knowledge society, a great deal of what we do falls under this category – programming, writing reports, analysing data, planning projects, creating marketing strategies. These jobs are usually carried out on a computer, so it's not too far-fetched to believe that you could practise them in the same way. The issue, of course, is how you get feedback on your code, your reports, your analyses, project plans and strategies. Computer software could be devised to examine your work and give you personalised feedback, but this is likely to be complicated and unreliable. Where computer networks can help, is in allowing you to share your work electronically with tutors and colleagues, wherever they are in the world, and to discuss your work using email, instant messaging and discussion forums.

Let's move on to interpersonal skills, the ones that involve you interacting with

customers, suppliers, bosses, peers and subordinates. A fair amount of success can be achieved by designing software that helps you to take your first steps in applying these skills – scenarios that you observe and critique, scenarios in which you are an active participant and determine what happens next. However, these are first steps and not as authentic as the experiences that can be laid on in the classroom, where you have the opportunity to role-play and receive direct feedback from real humans. But even this is not enough. No skills can be learned from one or two practice sessions – the learner needs to continue their development on-the-job, getting feedback on an ongoing basis from their manager or coach.

The third category of skill is the psychomotor: practical skills that involve you interacting with the physical environment – operating machines, driving tanks, lifting parcels or cutting down trees. Classrooms and computers are of little use when it comes to practising many psychomotor skills, although there are exceptions. When the skill is computer-related, such as typing or using a mouse, then it's not surprising to find users learning on the computer itself. More important is the use of simulators to teach those skills which are too costly and too hazardous to learn in the real-world – like flying planes, operating nuclear power plants, or navigating an oil rig.

So, can computers teach skills? Well, as we've seen, they can help in the early stages of learning any skill. When the skills are cognitive, they may be able to do the whole job – less so with interpersonal and psychomotor skills. So, e-learning is no more a panacea than the classroom, which leaves us with good old Nellie.

Why Nellie's not enough

'Sitting next to Nellie', more properly known as on-job instruction, is familiar to us all, as the way we get to learn the details of our jobs when more formal approaches are not available, i.e. much of the time. Nellie's been hard at work as a part-time trainer for thousands of years, long before classrooms, books, videos and computers appeared to provide her with some much needed help. Nellie's also capable of being highly effective, providing highly individualised instruction at the point of need, whenever and wherever that may be. Nellie's pupils don't get bored because she concentrates on only the most relevant and practical issues, ignores useless theory, and places the priority on 'you doing' rather than 'her telling'. (This Nellie is, of course, idealised. Some

Nellies have been known to be unavailable, unprepared, unresponsive, impatient, rambling and even asleep. Nellies cannot be relied upon totally.)

Personal tuition is nice while it lasts, which usually means as long as you can afford it. Which is why super-rich, top-ten tennis players employ world-class coaches to travel with them on the tour, practise with them every day and generally agonise about ways of achieving one percent improvements in performance; it's also why our kids have their tennis lessons in large groups of mixed ability, get to hit only a few balls a week and more often than not remain in a state of conscious incompetence.

One-to-one tuition is intensive because you, the learner, are always working. All too often, it provides inadequate opportunities for debate, for exploration and for reflection. It rarely comes with top-quality learning materials – videos, trouble-shooting guides, white papers and checklists – which stimulate thought and provide ongoing reference. These opportunities are more likely to be provided in formal, off-job learning situations, employing – you guessed it – classrooms and computers. The fact is we need all these approaches and more; we simply cannot rely on any one of these to do the whole job in every situation. We blend because we want our learners to achieve the best results possible at every point in their training programme, within a realistic timeframe and at a realistic cost. And that's the challenge.