

ONLINE AND OFFLINE LEARNING

How to get the best out of both

A Maastricht University and DECP collaborative effort: by Mareike Zeidler, Nina Joustra, Charlotte Nöthel, Daniela Bocmaru, Marco Sander and Alessandra Leclercq

With the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, everyday life has changed all over the world. Social distance emerged to stop the spread of the virus, forcing institutions to experience a shift from physical to digital, a transition shaped by technological and organisational challenges [1,2]. Within a few months, the world of meeting, discussing, exchanging ideas, teaching and learning has undergone a digital transformation that has enabled companies, organisations, and governments to virtually 'meet' people on the other side of the globe. Reducing travelling time and costs promises considerable gains in productivity, efficiency, and sustainability [3], offering new opportunities that may be acknowledged, ingrained, and sustained even after the pandemic.

These opportunities were not missed by DECP, who recognized the value of incorporating both online and offline elements into their activities. With this insight in mind, DECP set out to discover more about the possibilities of blended learning, with our help, a team of six Master's students from Maastricht University. After seven weeks of hard work, we discovered that the possibilities blended learning offers are endless, which inevitably adds a layer of complexity to what seemed like a simple question. Indeed, after conducting an extensive literature search on blended learning, we were left with more questions than we started. To enrich our perspective, we enlisted the help of 27 experts from DECP's and our own network. We made sure to explore a diversity of opinions, experiences, and best practices to provide a comprehensive account of blended learning, and aspects one must consider when designing and implementing a blended learning arrangement. We collected all our findings in an extensive report and a practical toolbox, meant as a guide for DECP, their partners, and any practitioner interested in blended learning. In fact, we structured our findings so that anyone, be it a researcher, a trainer, or a practitioner can choose the material that best suits their needs and interests, regardless of the organization's context or the blended learning format.

First, the report provides a theoretical overview of blended learning, structured in four main parts, and complemented by practical, expert advice. Any good learning programme, whether it is delivered online, offline, or in a blended format must consider how and why people learn, to ensure a good learning experience. As such, the first part of the report looks at how to optimize learning in any type of setting, exploring concepts from cognitive psychology and neuroscience. In this part, one can find out more information about what motivates people to learn, how our brain processes new knowledge, and how our attention or emotions influence learning retention and transfer. This section may prove of interest to anyone who wants to enrich their teaching or training activities with new (or old) techniques. After having established a good foundation for making learning stick, one can move on to the many definitions of blended learning. Therefore, the second part of the report presents readers with the various definitions of blended learning, and the many ways to combine online and offline elements. This section may prove

useful for readers searching for the blended learning arrangement that best fits the context of their work. After debating and considering which type of blended format is most appropriate, the next step is to design and implement a blended learning programme. In this part, we look at the components of a blended learning arrangement. Moreover, we describe how to combine, structure, and implement the various components in a complementary way, to maximize the teaching and learning experience. The findings of this section could prove useful for the reader who wants to design and implement new blended learning arrangements or improve existing ones. However, having all the components in place does not guarantee a successful blended learning experience. For this reason, the last part of the report deals with benefits, but also challenges related to blended learning, to better prepare readers for potential opportunities, as well as obstacles when designing and implementing blended learning.

While the report provides a good and extensive foundation of blended learning arrangements, we also created a toolbox for the readers who are more interested in actionable steps for setting up blended learning. The toolbox follows a similar structure as the report and contains insights from research, as well as the information we gathered in the interviews. Specifically, the toolbox is a practical, step-by-step guide to support readers in the design and implementation of blended learning, to enhance the experience of both instructors and learners.

Describing all the results of the project is a task too big for this article, however, we compiled seven action steps to get any practitioner started on their journey to explore blended learning. In particular, the action steps focus on points to consider when designing blended learning and competencies that are required on behalf of both experts and learners for the successful conception and implementation of blended learning activities. All the action steps are based on the scientific literature and the findings from the interviews.

7 Action Steps

#1 Start with the “why”

Learners need to develop a strong understanding of “why” it is crucial to learn. If the “why” is communicated and understood, the “how” is easy. The trainer and experts must communicate why it is vital to not only learn but also implement the new impulse by providing the learners with powerful reasons. Only when the “why” is clear, can the learning itself be tackled.

#2 Set your objective first

Setting the learning objective is the most important component when it comes to designing blended learning experiences. But what does that mean in practice? First, the objective and the purpose of the training must be defined. Once this is determined, course activities must be planned following the objective. A third step is to choose a way of assessment and evaluation that matches the objectives and

activities of the course. It is important that all of these components follow a constructive alignment to make blended learning a success.

#3 Involve learners and management

The importance of involving different stakeholders in the process of conception cannot be understated. Involving learners helps the instructors to find the right blend through considering learners' individual needs and preferences. Moreover, the learners' management must also be involved. The benefits of involving management extend beyond optimizing blended learning and can help transform an organization into a learning organization.

#4 Make it a journey - incorporate different phases

Another action step is to integrate different phases in a blended learning programme to transform the process into a learning journey. More precisely, learners must be activated before, during and after the training sessions. Splitting the content into various activities, such as by integrating learning "nuggets", ensures long term effects of the learning experience. For example, one should spread out the learning goals over a more extended period and focus on one single goal or skill in each time frame. In this way, learners get the chance to go more in-depth and build a deliberate practice.

#5 Make it fun

Making learning a journey is closely linked to making learning fun. Training allows the learners to escape stress at work and dive into an inspiring learning space that focuses on creativity and development instead of finding themselves back at school. Various tools have proven valuable to ensure a fun, engaging and exciting learning experience, such as Mentimeter, Kahoot or Mural. Gamification, for example, is another way to engage your learners even more with the content and keep them motivated to learn.

#6 Less is more - reduce technology

When designing a blended learning experience, the role of technology automatically comes in. There are great tools to use and integrate to make training more vivid and interactive. However, caution is advised! Integrating too much technology may impede the learning process, as both learners and instructors may be too concerned about dealing with the technology. Therefore, the right technology must be chosen carefully, and clear instructions to ease the handling of instructors and learners.

#7 Train your Trainers

It is important to recognize that the role of the trainer has changed. Trainers must support the learners in self-organized learning, in which the learners experience autonomy, competence and relatedness. Thus, trainers become real learning companions by providing space for learners to share their insights, experiences and questions. Therefore, organisations must work towards a shift in the mindset of the trainers and prepare them for their new role by providing train-the-trainer workshops.

Conclusion

How does one go about designing and implementing effective blended learning? This is the question at the heart of our project. We provided a comprehensive account of blended learning, along with its possible dimensions and ingredients, as well as suggestions to ensure that each component adds up to a meaningful learning experience.

In short, any blended learning programme that wants to optimise learning retention and transfer should start by considering the learner's **motivation** to attend the specific course or training, and by setting the right **objective**. Subsequently, the blended learning programme should be designed as a **learning journey**, not forgetting to incorporate some **fun**! Regarding the use of technology, **less is more**, and it should never be used at the cost of sacrificing the quality of the content. Finally, there are challenges that come with transitioning to blended learning, requiring effort in **training** and preparing the **instructors**, not just the learners.

To conclude, we must leave readers with a final piece of advice: the right way of implementing blended learning is the way that works best!

For more information or access to the report and the practical toolbox, please contact Jos Van Erp via E-Mail (erp@decp.nl).

References

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