Why use blended learning approaches?

This resource was adapted from an introduction to a course on Blended Learning.

There are a variety of ways to use a blend of course elements to create an effective and engaging learning experience.

Here we will take an expanded view of the term "blended Learning," broader than the one you may be familiar with, much like authors such as Clive Shepard who recently published a book entitled "More than Blended Learning." In fact, we may take the broadest view of all for the term "blended."

Most commonly, "blended learning" is used to describe mixing online and classroom elements to make a more flexible course and to take advantage of the practical benefits of each of those delivery modes. But we believe we should expand the concept to include blending other elements for the best learning results.

We suggest the analogy of nutrition to help justify why we think blended learning is valuable to consider. Just as nutritionists recommend having a diet that represents all the food groups in the right proportions, it can be valuable to include a variety of learning approaches. This variety means additional ways for learners to interact with the content, more means of explanation, more ways to practice applying it in more contexts, and the cognitive flexibility to apply it in other ways outside training.

Another reason to consider using blended learning approaches is the growing acceptance that learning is not an event, but always a journey.

The concept of a learning journey recognizes that learning does not start and stop with an isolated learning opportunity or event, and that viewing learning as taking place over a greater period can be of great benefit. The journey metaphor also implies a few additional considerations for planning sessions, beyond sequencing content and activities. For example:

- Learning requires building upon prior knowledge, adding to or adapting what is already known, not starting with a blank slate. The learning journey can be expanded BEFORE core events by asking participants to complete self-directed learning or preparatory project work to prepare for the experience. This can also help to bring all learners to a similar starting level.
- The learning should BEGIN by gaining a commitment to learn. This can be accomplished through a self-assessment against competencies or other standards to identify performance gaps, through establishing personal learning goals, and even by requiring the signing of a learning "contract" to follow through on all phases of the journey.
- Learning should continue AFTER the core events to require reporting or reflecting on the experience of applying of what was learned on the job. This might be done during an Impact Evaluation, for example (see Chapter 8).
- Learning can continue AFTER core events by promoting on-the-job experiences that include interactions with managers and colleagues to provide reflection and feedback, as well as self-reflection and checking against job aids that trainers might provide.

Below, you can see a list of the elements of any planned learning event. These are all explained more completely in additional resources. The image that follows summarizes the elements.

The first attribute that can be blended is the **learning solution**—or whether the training is done in a formal course, with a start and end date, or using informal means, such as on-the-job coaching and mentoring or self-directed learning.

The second element is the **delivery mode**—what is usually what is meant to be blended in "blended learning." Here, we are speaking about whether learning takes place in classroom, on-line, or on-the-job environments.

Third, we can blend **learning strategies**, or the general themes that guide how training is conducted—such as lectures, readings, discussions, exercises, projects, and more. Each of these has many variations.

Fourth, we can blend **learning activities**, which are specific ways of implementing interactive learning strategies. These can number in the hundreds, but they include questions and problems, demonstrations, many types of discussions, tutorials, games, and simulations, to name just a few of the more common learning activities.

Finally, learning activities can be conducted using a variety of **interaction modes**. This can refer to using different sizes of groups—such as the full class, small groups, or individual learning. It also means a bit more than this, such as HOW the learner interacts with others and with the learning content.

So, you can see there are a lot of ways we can mix things up in teaching and training. And this is good. Students need a nutritious and tasty learning experience, and that requires variety. It makes them more hardy and ready for the complexities of the real world.