

Supporting Blended Learning Environments with Adult Learners

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Introduction

The Applied Digital Learning Master's of Education degree program at Lamar University is a premier opportunity to explore disruptive teaching and learning practices in the 21st century. To create an authentic learning opportunity, our professors require learners to write an Innovation Plan specific to our work context. This Innovation Plan is the basis for all learning in the program. The ADL program also advocates the use of blended learning as the primary modality for authentic learning. Blended learning incorporates a combination of both "face-to-face" instruction and virtual or computer-based instruction (Mavropolous, 2019). Blended learning also supports both informal and formal learning components as valuable options (Baker, 2021), recognizing that each is well-positioned to reinforce the other (Collin et. al, 2012). With blended learning, the learner experiences professional development, "at least in part through online learning with some element of control over time, place, path, and/or pace" (Horn et al., 2014, p. 34). Blended learning is a term most often referred to in K-12 or higher education environments, yet there is a compelling use case for its application to adult learners in a variety of settings.

Blended learning is expected to grow in adult learning environments due to remote or hybrid work schedules, evidence of increased engagement, cost savings, and strategic agility. However, there is a limited amount of research on blended learning, especially as it applies to adults. From our experience and research, we present a three-pronged approach to designing, implementing, and supporting blended learning in adult working environments. We will examine blended learning for adult professionals. We also connect instructional design principles and methodologies that promote a multitude of blended learning approaches. In so doing, we will create a context for instructional design as it relates to the collaboration and engagement of the adult learning audience (Lewis, 2021).

Design It

Stephen Lewis

The world of work has changed. Emerging from a transformative time, organizations are shifting from a traditional classroom or corporate university structure to more blended and integrated learning experiences. Organizations are beginning to think about learning as a *process* rather than learning as an *event* (Moore, 2017). Today's business question is, "how do we build a future-ready workforce?"

In my Innovation Plan, I explore a specific use case related to the Bon Secours Mercy Health front-line leadership program. This cohort-based program is a series of seven 90-minute virtual instructor-led sessions delivered over Zoom. The current format is the result of a good faith effort to make as much content available to new leaders as possible while yielding a result of low attendance, limited engagement, and questionable outcomes. This type of experience is where the instructor is viewed as

a “knowledge broker” and a participant is a “knowledge consumer,” whereby there is an attempt to transmit a “pre-defined body of knowledge” from the broker to the consumer (Beckem & Watkins, 2012). This model is no longer effective.

What do adult learners and organizations want?

Adult learners want experiences that fit their schedule, strengthen their performance, and present content that supports moment-to-moment successes. Organizations want learning experiences that support the development of key behaviors. Enter blended learning.

On-demand performance support drives business outcomes

The goal of blended learning for adult learners is to first ask, “what is the business objective or key performance indicator (KPI) we are seeking to impact?” KPIs are evidence of tracking towards specific business metrics or desired outcomes. To engineer successful blended learning, learning professionals must ask, “how can we support adult learners to work at their best level of performance today?” Learning teams must be competent enough to design learning experiences based on the adult learner’s professional and personal needs, with the learner being able to access that learning in a venue and timeframe that is optimal for their day-to-day work and schedule demands.

Curating the right blend to strengthen learner behaviors

Blended learning is a design approach that directly supports the pursuit and achievement of KPIs. Why? Because behavior change drives higher levels of personal and professional performance. Learning objectives are written to align with and impact specific business KPIs therefore, the content selected must specifically impact the progression of learner behaviors that fulfill the designed learning objectives. All extra, unnecessary content or information must be eliminated from the plan (Moore, 2017). Once the content is selected, curated, and verified by subject matter experts - the instructional designer selects the most appropriate design modalities to deliver the content to the learner.

How do you know if you get it right?

The beauty and brilliance of blended learning is that it enables flexibility and affords learning through a facilitative approach rather than a prescriptive (Altun & Buyukduman, 2007). Blended learning is built on constructivist instructional design principles, which enable a strong connection between flexibility and intentionality. Instructional designers have the privilege of being the strategic partner that engages adult learners “in rewarding learning experiences that can lead to deep personal transformation”, which in turn can have direct and meaningful impacts on organizational performance (Ryman et. al, 2009, p. 34).

Implement It

Kimberly Purvis

As previously stated, the traditional working environment that we have known has been fundamentally transformed. The pandemic has shifted us into a stage where we are looking to create avenues of success in an ever-evolving hybrid environment. Adjustments must be made to meet the emerging needs of the professionals of today. An arising issue is that employees are no longer content working

from the office five days a week. However, employers are not sold on working fully from home. There are benefits but also detriments to working in a fully virtual or traditional environment. The workplace of today, created by the Covid-19 pandemic, requires that we find a way to blend virtual and traditional with the correct balance to meet the needs of all learners.

Identifying the need

For most of my teaching career, I have been a mentor and trainer for online ESL educators. This means I am in a completely virtual work environment. My area of focus for my innovation plan is the creation of ePortfolios for online educators. My goal is to help online educators create a professional identity that highlights their skills and provides an ongoing portfolio of learning for career development.

While the pandemic created significant issues for other career paths, I was lucky that my virtual environment required almost no transition during quarantine. Watching colleagues in brick-and-mortar schools and other corporate settings try to navigate the new, completely virtual world they were thrust into, I found myself wondering if our fully remote setting was the best for our adult learners. Studies have shown that completely virtual environments can leave professionals feeling shunned or left out and inhibit trust, connection, and mutual purpose from developing, while face-to-face contact could prevent this from happening (Grenny & Maxfield, 2018). I could see the difficulty that some professionals had without the face-to-face connections they had grown accustomed to, which kickstarted my desire to search for the benefits of blended learning.

Realizing the benefits

Dan Biewener (2021) shares the five benefits of blended learning as being the ability to address all learning styles, being able to utilize different learning methods to encourage engagement, learning, and retention, providing learners the control of their own learning pace, monetary savings, and upward and downward modular scalability. These are areas that benefit every working environment and show that all professionals can benefit from blended learning. Blended learning has also been shown in many studies to be the “strategy that adapts to all audiences” (Savage, 2018).

When the world began to transition back to in-person learning, it seemed as though the blended environment produced the ideal work-life balance and the most productivity of all approaches. In fact, a PwC study (2021) showed that while 83% believed the shift to remote work was a success, 87% believed the office setting was important for team collaboration. Seeing the benefits of the blended style working after the pandemic was a motivational factor in finding out if blended learning could provide online educators a way to develop their skills more fully. I became highly interested in the best methods for adult learning and what balance was the most advantageous for all learners.

Weighing the options to find the right balance

Creating a blended learning environment provides authentic learning experiences where professionals benefit through collaboration, reflection, and communication. The key to an effective blended environment is knowing the correct balance of virtual and in-person learning for your organization's needs. There are many assorted styles of blended learning. Focusing on the three main models will help to determine what may work best for your learners.

Monica Savage (2018) lists the three most common models as follows:

1. The Flipped Model – Probably the most well-known model where the online portion is introduced before class, and class time is used for discussion and activities.
2. The Face-to-Face Driver – This model is mostly used in corporate environments using instructors in the classroom with pre and post-activities being self-guided online.
3. The Online Driver Model (aka Flex or Enriched Virtual) – Online learning is the foundation of this model, with in-person offerings for support and guidance.

Implementing blended learning has been proven to be beneficial for all working professionals and the right balance will create success. These three styles give a starting place. Knowing which model works best requires identifying factors such as your audience, goals, and objectives and looking at additional areas such as time and budget constraints. It is worth the effort to find the right balance to ensure your learning environment is effective in producing all the said benefits of blended learning. Every workplace will have unique needs and an individualized balance that will work best.

Connect It

Karin Stateler

I serve in a 5A district in Texas with roughly 14,000 students and 2,000 employees (*GCISD Quick Facts*, 2021). Because I am in a digital learning support role in the district, I work mainly with adults in an office. However, I support all staff, students, and even parents as they comprehend the “why” and “how” of technology implementation in our district. Recently, my team underwent a bit of restructuring. This will require us to work differently to ensure the technology implementation needs of the district are supported successfully.

For my innovation plan, I intend to share ways the central office in my district can work with the existing technology to go almost completely paperless. As the environment that we work in changes rapidly, reskilling opportunities for employees are a priority (Stateler, 2021). My specific focus for my research is on creating professional learning networks for administrative assistants. As my current team changes, we must work more efficiently to achieve the same results. Therefore, administrative assistants must lean more on one another and less on trainers in a common, collective environment as their work alongside technology shifts.

What does this mean, and what will it look like?

In our rapidly changing world filled with an abundance of information, learning is bound by two frameworks. One framework is called cultivation, which is the primary role of my job. That is, I take nearly unlimited resources and “consolidate them into a bounded and structured environment” (Brown & Thomas, 2011, p. 19). As new information arises and other information becomes obsolete, I also adjust the resources to meet our district’s specific needs. The other framework is called the collective, which is “a community of like-minded people who help [people] learn and meet a particular set of needs” (Brown & Thomas, 2011, p. 21). My goal with my research is to support administrators and their assistants in the implementation of a meaningful collective.

How do I get the learners connected and supporting one another outside of the classroom?

My goal is to create a collective, professional learning network for administrators and their assistants to access intentionally curated resources that support district technology initiatives. This looks like intentional chat rooms using Google Spaces dedicated to supporting one another with technology questions. This also looks like intentional systems created around the use of cloud applications like Google Workspace, mainly Shared Drives and all the Google productivity applications.

How do I create an environment where learners support one another in blended learning training?

In face-to-face and blended environments like our monthly Lunch and Learn sessions, I will create and model lessons in which all learners are required to interact with the content through collaboration. Some of the digital resources that will support this collaboration include Jamboard, Padlet, LMS Discussion Boards, Flipgrid, Mentimeter, and Pear Deck.

What results do I expect from my research?

I hope to see an impact on the type and number of help tickets from administrators and their assistants, specifically from those who frequently ask technology questions to Google Spaces and central admin employees who frequent Lunch and Learn training sessions. I predict that help ticket volume could increase or decrease depending on the user, although I imagine the type of help tickets will be regarding more technologically advanced issues.

How does this connect to blended learning?

Collaboration and the blended environment are inextricably linked. Because the blended learning environment includes some level of learner control over when, where, and how they learn, the ability to access information and community is integral to a successful blended learning environment. Therefore, learners must rely on one another to construct information. Each learner must contribute to the learning environment in meaningful ways, and in so doing, they change the learning environment (Brown & Thomas, 2011). This cycle, used in conjunction with blended learning practices, can support the environment by providing access and information within the context of common work circumstances.

Lessons Learned

The “one-size-fits-all” learning approach is no longer relevant in today’s adult learning environment. Adult learners are yearning for a more customized work-life balance, while organizations are seeking economical ways to scale learning assets. Learning culture is critical to the success of the learning

experience, and we have seen through the pandemic that the perfect learning environment lies somewhere in between remote and traditional settings.

Blended learning has been proven to benefit adult learners over solely traditional or fully remote work environments. In the words of Hilberath (2020), “Hybrid work models, done right, will allow organizations to better recruit talent, achieve innovation, and create value for all stakeholders. By acting boldly now, they can define a future of work that is more flexible, digital, and purposeful.”

We encourage you to look at your current learning environment to determine areas of needed improvement and begin to implement blended learning techniques to find the right balance to bring about a positive change in your organization. Blended learning supports professionals by providing authentic learning experiences that lead to an established professional identity, encourages motivation and collaboration, and promotes learning and growth (Purvis, 2021). We hope readers are empowered and motivated to begin experimenting with various innovative ideas and tools that promote blended learning for adult learners in professional settings.

Conclusion

Blended learning is boundaryless. The work of blended learning today is about “best fit”. Blended learning strategies provide instructional designers, organizations, and adult learners with scalable solutions for both content and technology. Whether in-person, virtual, self-directed, informal, or social - blended learning empowers instructional designers to create experiences that are “fit for purpose” instead of “one size fits all”.

Blended learning is expected to grow in corporate and workplace-learning environments due to the evidence and success of increased collaboration and interaction, cost savings, and agility to strategically align curated content and knowledge to match the goals, objectives, and culture of an organization (Mubayrik, 2018).

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