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Title: Blended training – how does that work?

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ABSTRACT

Blended training – how does that work?

When HRD professionals try to move training online there is considerable resistance to face. The resistance does not just come from the learner, it is often the experienced trainer who puts up the biggest fight. Trainers are well aware of the immediacy of face-to-face learning events, the performance criteria, the reading of atmosphere and facial expression, the adjustment of content based on a continuous checking of understanding. But faced with tight budgets, increased mandatory demands and mobile and distributed working, the case for using technology is convincing. The purpose of this paper is to identify the opportunities which blended training, applying Web 2.0 affordances to face-to-face interaction, might offer small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs).

This working paper is the initial stage of a research project which aims to explore the effectiveness of a blended approach to training and development in small businesses. Such businesses rarely have in-house trainers: either principals in the business will carry out their own development activities with staff, or local training providers will be approached for help with chronic or acute business problems. In difficult trading circumstances, such organisations often cut training expenditure first, a reasonable approach based on the economics of the situation, but a short-sighted one given the longer term effect on human capital development, and its impact on competitive advantage.

In order to determine the effectiveness of a blended approach to training, we have to establish low cost or no cost affordances of Web 2.0 technologies which may add value to small-scale training sessions, and develop a case for their use. If the case is convincing, and can overcome the traditional resistance of face-to-face trainers to the use of online media for learning, then we have a baseline with which to present a business case and develop proposals to test the effectiveness of blended training in SMEs. The author conducted an extended focus group with professional trainers who work in SMEs to test out some of the objections to online media for learning and develop hypotheses concerning the potential value of blended training to such organisations.

Introduction

Just as the advent of e-learning has focussed educators on the process and characteristics of learning itself (Manson 2008), so the application of technologies, particularly Web 2.0 technologies, encourages a focus on what exactly is happening in face-to-face instruction (Yelon 2006 p24). It is in making decisions about whether and what to transfer to online media that we begin to question what we are trying to achieve, and whether the best instructional methods are being used, or whether this is simply the tried and tested route we have always used. The read-write Web in particular offers potentially new routes to learning which were not possible in a traditional training workshop. For example simulations and videos of situations which are not possible to create within a training workshop could previously be consumed only passively, with a trainer using this material to stimulate discussion and

application of techniques or protocols. Online, such simulations and videos can be part of an interactive learning experience offering direct and immediate learner feedback. Such technology can also offer direct contact with learners at other sites, or experts at other sites, facilitating networking and learning relationships.

Learning outcomes will reflect the objectives set by the organisation for its training programmes and no amount of technology will improve poorly designed training with weak learning outcomes and flawed instructional method (Barratt-Pugh et al 2011, Doo 2006). Appropriate training needs analysis, thorough planning of learning outcomes which fit strategic as well as individual needs and embedding of training interventions within operational plans can provide an effective foundation for good instructional design. However, that design can easily fall into tried and tested formulae. Directive and didactic training practice which focusses largely on information delivery and superficial evaluation of participants' satisfaction will usually fail to stimulate learning transfer.

In many classroom based training courses, participants do not necessarily demonstrate the level of self-direction, independent learning and high motivation necessary to be able to discover and learn the same content in a purely online environment. In the workplace, learners are likely to be adaptive, strong informal learners with little time and many commitments outside work (Jeffcoat Bartley and Golek 2004). Hence the need for blend.

From the author's experience as a corporate trainer, when employees and management are open to informal learning, spurred on by the need to stay ahead of the market and enabled by the relatively small size of the organisation to respond flexibly to market opportunity, the concept of attending training courses does not sit well. Yet despite reluctant attenders, managers of small organisations will often have recourse to external trainers to attempt to "fix" long-standing behavioural or interpersonal issues, as well as providing for technical operational training needs, where this goes beyond expertise available within the firm. The end result is therefore a training challenge for outsourced professional trainers who face resistance from participants, often directed to attend rather than choosing to do so, and often highly sensitive to any content which does not directly relate to their operational context. These strong informal learners are likely to be impatient with full day or even half day workshops as they are seen to eat into their productive time. Technology could provide some opportunities for improvement here, both in offering more flexibility in terms of time used for learning, and in offering personalised, tailored learning pathways (Hall 2009).

This raises questions about what to blend, what methods work best online and face-to-face, what combinations and at what learning stages online and face-to-face methods may be best. Not all of these questions can be addressed in this paper, which will aim to outline ways in which online learning may be used to add value to training interventions drawing on focus group responses and literature review.

The learning strategy and identified outcomes will dictate the purpose of training, but with a rapidly increasing range of online learning activities, (such as interactive response systems, group wikis, individual and collective blogging and micro-

blogging, social bookmarking, infographics), it can be difficult for small organisations to identify the most effective combination of physical and online learning tools. It is also wise to include text in the mix, since reading can be an online or a physical page-turning activity, relating to the learner-controlled category of activity but not necessarily best done from screen, nor necessarily best done during a classroom session (Moe & Rye 2011).

What can online learning offer SMEs?

If we are looking for what Driscoll refers to as a 'persisting change in human performance or performance potential resulting from the learner's experience and interaction with the world' (Driscoll 2000), then we need to work out what it is about work-based learning which can be enhanced with technology. Work-based learning, particularly in small enterprises, is difficult to categorise because of the range of issues it will be required to address. For example the development challenges faced by a professional partnership (such as a legal practice or healthcare practice) will be very different from those faced by a small production unit, or a new social enterprise.

There will be motivation to learn to be stimulated, knowledge content to be imparted, skill proficiency to be practised, application to be assessed and competence to be evaluated. Choosing which of these will work best online or face-to-face requires a good knowledge and understanding of the techniques available in both online and face-to-face worlds. This paper proposes a range of technologies, particularly those which are open source and thus available to SMEs with low development budgets, which are related to pedagogies and instructional methods, allowing an informed choice for the professional trainer who is trying to move work-based learning into the online world inhabited by their staff.

Substituting online learning for face-to-face training

In an extended focus group with a group of trainers working in small businesses in the UK, the author posed the question: why can we not simply substitute online learning for training workshops? As would be expected, the trainers were adamant that their workshops could not be duplicated or replaced by online learning. However the comments suggested that this was not such an easy claim to warrant. When asked what was the vital element of face-to-face training which was not transferable to an e-learning format, trainers were convinced there were three main objections. In their view, face-to-face training workshops were best for

- Delivering and prioritising required information
- Checking participant understanding of concepts and applications
- Ensuring learning experiences were associated with enjoyment

Each of these objections will be addressed in turn.

Giving and prioritising required information can be done effectively by an inspiring and authoritative trainer who is well prepared. The trainers in the focus group were all convinced they had the requisite skills to do this, and indeed that is how they earned a living. They considered that they could marshal and present information in stages suitable for participants, that face-to-face they were better able to deliver

such information convincingly and judge effectively when participants were no longer able to absorb information, or when they needed further reinforcement of key information. While this is not necessarily in dispute, a significant level of training expertise is required to achieve such goals, and experience suggests that trainers used by small businesses often lack such expertise, whether they are outsourced or internally sourced. Online media can also offer the prioritisation and presentation of information, in fact this is a key attribute of the Web, where information is available in huge quantities on demand. The only difficulty which then arises is how to identify sound and relevant information which can be trusted. Evaluation of Web-based information is a digital literacy skill which may develop with experience but may have to be learned (van Deursen et al 2009). It could be argued that a better use of a trainer's time would be in helping participants to learn to evaluate such freely available and sometimes conflicting information (Howard Rheingold's "critical consumption"), rather than simply providing an already digested version.

Checking participants' understanding of concepts and applications:
In the environment of a training workshop or course this is usually achieved by questioning or setting exercises/activities in which participants can demonstrate their understanding. The trainers argued that this was best done face-to-face. It is certainly the case that a skilled trainer can modify questioning and activities in the light of participant response and that this would compare favourably with, say, an automated test online. However Web 2.0 does enable participant feedback and response, for example through asynchronous and synchronous discussion as well as providing opportunities for consistency of feedback which is difficult to replicate in personally-delivered sessions. In addition, screencasts or podcasts, and even growing lists of Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) can be replayed as often as needed by the learner, something which is not so easy after a face-to-face session.

Ensuring learning experiences were associated with enjoyment – or fun in learning:
This objection was seen by the trainers interviewed as something which could not be reproduced online, and there is a strong case for this. If the motivation to learn can be increased by collaborative enjoyable experiences, then a face-to-face session would certainly be the vehicle of choice. That is not to say that online media are not capable of delivering enjoyment. While the training DVDs and CD-Roms of the static web have often delivered a straight and factual learning experience, the read/write Web offers spontaneous connections, for example through micro-blogging or YouTube, which can provide entertainment as well as learning opportunities.

Adding value to learning experiences through technology

Given that these main objections were not conclusive in favour of face-to-face training, and that in skilled hands a physical training session was likely to offer considerable learning benefits, an alternative approach may be considered: that of adding value to learning experiences through technology, i.e. using a blend rather than exclusively face-to-face or online training. Discussions of blended or hybrid learning abound in the Education literature (for a useful summary see Bonk & Graham 2006). In Higher Education there is an increasing consensus suggesting that combining both face-to-face and online interaction in learning will deliver more value than using one channel alone. However there is relatively little academic literature which demonstrates the case for blending training. Perhaps this is because

training is seen as inherently a face-to-face activity. But if we look at training as a formal method of HRD within workplaces, then we have no reason to confine this to physical methods. In particular, as budgets are constrained for development activity and with the spread of mobile and flexible working through the affordances of information and communication technologies, there is a strong case for using these technologies for training.

One of the major affordances of such technologies is to increase the time flexibility of delivering learning opportunities. We might therefore consider the use of Web-based learning before, during and after a face-to-face training course or session. If we consider purely passive use of online media, then provision of relevant briefing information or questions prior to a training workshop, research via the Web during a workshop and follow-up emails or surveys after a workshop are available. However Web 2.0 opens up a potentially richer set of options. Prior to the face-to-face session, for example, it is possible to offer screencasts which include interactive options, allowing participants to evaluate the relevance of the training session and comment with specific personal objectives and self-assessment of competence, fore-warning the trainer of familiarity or lack of the same with the content proposed. Considerable sections of information relevant to the learning outcome can be delivered via the Web and opened for discussion prior to meeting. During the workshop there are many opportunities afforded by the Web for live polling and streaming or direct connections with experts in the field or customers to ensure activity and relevance. After the session, collaborative learning can continue online through wikis, blogs and video-conferencing to build on networks made during a session and maintain and increase their influence beyond the “course”.

There are two major objections produced by the group of trainers interviewed to the above suggestions for online learning activity: time and cost. The availability of work time for learning over and above actually attending a course or workshop may be very limited indeed, however due to the flexibility of using time convenient to the learner, it may be possible to make the case. The main argument here will be the potential to increase the relevance and value of the face-to-face learning experience by added investment of time as the introductory and follow-up stages of the programme. The cost element of using Web 2.0 can be very limited or non-existent for small organisations as open or public domain software is available for the applications mentioned above (see appendix for a sample list). A more likely hindrance to the use of online media for learning is ignorance of the applications available, and this is something the professional trainer has to offer the client business.

Reviewing pedagogies for workplace learning which might be possible with blended training

Rather than remain comfortably within the didactic training practice experienced by many SMEs and offered to them by many professional trainers, technology-enhanced learning offers the chance to use different pedagogies and learning philosophies such as social constructionism (Papert & Harel 1991) and connectivism (Kop & Hill 2008), and the development of professional communities of practice (Lave & Wenger 1991) and habits of reflective learning (Moon 2000).

Each of these learning philosophies offers additional value for HRD in the small business. Social constructionism emphasizes the active role of participants in making their own meaning and developing learning by making ideas explicit and sharing them with others. Both face-to-face and online channels are capable of offering opportunities for this kind of learning to happen, but the online channels offer this on a time extensive basis, rather than the limited opportunities afforded by short workshops where groups need to spend some time learning how to work together before they can begin to learn productively.

Connectivism remains controversial as a school of thought but George Siemens' work and Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) have done much to popularise the sense of networked learning defined here. Social networks through, for example LinkedIn and Twitter, have enabled rapid information search and often connections between professionals or followers of a particular idea which can provide ongoing practical value for problem solving in small organisations. Communities of practice – while the theory originally had quite limited application – has clear relevance to small business, especially in the not-for-profit sector, where employees and managers can easily become isolated and out of touch with markets and competitor activity.

Reflective learning is increasingly adopted in Higher Education and was profoundly influenced by Reg Revans (1982) and his promotion of action learning, together with Schon's work on the reflective practitioner (1983) and Kolb's notion of experiential learning with a leaning towards active experimentation (Kolb 1984). Nonetheless the adoption of reflective learning in the workplace, especially in SMEs, remains slow and sometimes non-existent (Walsh 2009). Online learning can offer that elusive time element as well as applications (blogs in particular) which specifically encourage productive reflection both individually and collectively, particularly where systematic approaches to reflection are offered.

Concluding comments

The paper has reviewed a number of arguments for and against blended training, in the sense of enhancing training in SMEs by using Web 2.0 technologies. The discussion has suggested that most professional trainer objections to the use of the Web alongside face-to-face training can be countered provided both are used in tandem and both are subject to a high quality HRD framework of training needs analysis, learning and teaching strategy and outcomes which relate directly both to the organisation and to the individual participants. Web 2.0 was seen to have particular affordances which answer major objections to training, especially concerning time and cost. A range of ideas and techniques, and associated websites, have been proposed. However the proof of the arguments will be in developing practical tests of blended training in situ in SMEs. There appears to be a strong business case for blended training, moving away from traditional training practice to increase relevance to participant needs and to enable better value and training transfer from programmes which include face-to-face sessions and interactive online activities.

APPENDIX 1.

Sample applications useful for SME blended training which have at least a level of free usage.

www.polleverywhere.com (participant response system using SMS or Web)
www.mindmeister.com (mindmapping – can be shared over the Web)
www.wikispaces.com (wiki application)
www.wordpress.com (blogging tool which can be set up as a private group or individual or fully public blog)
www.edu.glogster.com (tool for developing posters or webpages online including graphics)
www.youtube.com (widely known video application, can be used by trainers both to upload and share or to find useful and relevant materials)
www.gapminder.com (graphics and statistical source, particularly useful for market and economic learning)
www.jing.com (screen capture, video recording and sharing)
www.slideshare.com (sharing of PowerPoint slidesets)
www.prezi.com (zooming presentation software which can incorporate videos, images etc)
www.googledocs.com (platform for sharing and co-authoring documents)
www.moodle.com (open source virtual learning environment)
www.twitter.com (micro-blogging tool)
www.linkedin.com (social network for professionals includes options to set up groups)
www.skype.com (instant messaging and VOIP tool)
www.dropbox.com (enables sharing of large files which cannot be attached to emails)

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