

Are You Ready to Move—Into the New (Virtual) Classroom?



No one likes the tasks associated with moving. From the planning to the sorting, to the packing, unpacking and getting settled into a new place—moving takes time, energy and usually makes us uncomfortable for a while. But once we're settled, better things start to happen. This article explores strategies for getting your organization ready to move (some) of its learning and development resources into today's world of virtual delivery.

Deciding to Move

As you consider the future of virtual training in your organization, ask yourself:

- In how many different locations are your employees—U.S. and/or international?
- How many dollars are being spent to cover travel costs?
- How often do you hear employees say they can't take time away to attend training?
- How many leaders/managers does your organization have who lead virtual teams?

While there are certainly more questions to ponder, these can begin some important dialogue about the future of training delivery in your organization.

What's Wrong with This Place?

In 2008, live, instructor-led (in-person) training accounted for 71.5% of the learning hours delivered.¹ The consolidated average for technology-based learning reached 30.4% of learning hours provided. Of this online learning, roughly 80 percent was self-paced.²

The problem with self-paced learning as a whole is that most of it is never completed. According to Development Dimensions International, 50 – 90% of web-based courses are never completed.³ For some aspects of technical training, this completion rate may be acceptable if we believe that people should simply access the information they need to learn based on their existing knowledge and experience. That approach is not so effective when people must learn processes and skills that build upon one another such as coaching, interviewing, and leadership in order to successfully apply them. We can do better!

¹ ASTD 2009 State of the Industry Report, 15.

² Ibid., 15.

³ Pete E. Weaver, "Avoiding e-Learning Failure," White paper, 2004.

There Is Another Path



Too often those of us in workplace learning and performance find ourselves caught in this dilemma of having to choose between instructor-led classroom training and self-paced e-learning. But there are other options. E-learning, blended with other performance support techniques and structure, significantly improves both completion rates and learning-to-performance application.

The rest of this article explores a path that takes some of the best of classroom instruction and e-learning and combines them into a highly organized, highly-interactive, time-specific learning experience that participants complete.

First let's distinguish between e-learning and blended learning. We will use these definitions:

E-learning is the use of internet technologies to deliver a broad array of solutions that enhance knowledge and performance (Rosenberg, 2001).

Blended learning is a combination of learning methods that help to advance and promote retention and performance improvement. Some of these methods may be delivered via the web, while others engage a variety of technologies. Additionally, these can be supported by face-to-face instructor-led training that focuses on skill practice and application.

This learner-centered model illustrates some of the components that might be part of a blended learning experience.



An Approach to Virtual Blended Learning

For ordinary people to accomplish extraordinary things, they need structure and support. A successful blended learning course provides both of these so that participants are more likely to complete and apply their learnings to their work. A blended learning approach draws on the best of in-person classroom and e-learning. To be more specific, this approach is instructor-led, organized, time-specific and highly interactive. Participants enroll as a class and, together, participate in a variety of activities that provide learning and performance application of the content.

Compare Digs

To get a better sense of some of the differences, compare an instructor-led classroom course and a blended learning course in leadership. Note that the content is the same for both.

	Instructor-led Classroom Course	Blended Learning Course
Number of Participants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 20 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 20
Course Length	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1 ½ days (12 hours) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3-4 hours/week over four weeks
Participant Materials Costs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Same 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Same
Travel Costs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • \$300 – \$600 (or more) for out-of-area participants 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • None
Training Delivery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instructor-dependent 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Technology-dependent
Instructor Facilitation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conducted in the classroom during class time 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conducted anywhere at anytime during the course
Learning Time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instructor-managed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-managed and instructor-managed
Learner Equipment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • None 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Telephone and PC with audio and video
Learning Structures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Course schedule • Classroom exercises, case studies, and discussions • Discussion groups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Course schedule • Weekly exercises, case studies, and online discussions • Virtual classroom webconferences
Learning Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instructor-facilitated discussions • Verbal feedback and support from the instructor and other course participants 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instructor-facilitated virtual discussions • Online and telephone coaching • Other course participants— either in person or online • Text feedback and support (e.g. discussion boards and e-mail) • Online Q & A
Skill Practice Opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • During class time 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • During webconferences • Virtual team case studies • Individual applications between weekly assignments

When participants learn over time and apply the concepts and skills as they're learning, they are more confident in their ability to perform them on the job. They also develop a sense of community (support) with other participants (located anywhere in the world) which broadens their organizational perspective and commitment.

Moving from the Old Classroom to the New (Virtual) Classroom

Think about ways in which you may be able to shift some of your resources to include virtual blended learning. For any learning and development intervention to be successful, it has to be aligned with the business strategy.

Before You Move

1. Have a strategy.

To make blended learning successful, consider where it fits into your organization's overall performance improvement strategy. This may involve an organizational analysis to identify workplace performance opportunities and gaps.

2. Consider where blended learning fits into your strategy.

Do you have an organizational culture that's conducive to virtual blended learning delivery as well as the resources available to support it? Identify costs in terms of both hard dollars being spent and soft dollars related to staff salaries and expertise needed to develop course material for a blended learning format.

3. Set some performance goals, plans and measures.

Develop goals to address performance opportunities and gaps. Identify target audiences, content, and resources that will be required.

4. Start small

Select an audience and performance gap to address with a blended learning approach. Start slowly, gain experience and track progress. Like most things, it's never as easy as it seems.

5. Expand

Once you have built some successes, look for opportunities to expand. Market and communicate the results and impact of the courses to your organization.



Balance Your Budget and Your Options

E-learning and blended learning are not panaceas or magic bullets. But they do provide opportunities to leverage your learning and development resources. They also offer an increase of learning-to-performance above the fifteen percent typically gained from in-person classroom training.

Start Moving!

It's not too late to move into the new, virtual classroom. You and your learners will like the new space.

Author Bio

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Lee has presented internationally at learning and performance conferences on the topics of *Optimizing Accountability in Teams and Client Partnerships* and *e-Leading: Maximizing the Power of Global Virtual Teams*. He is a published author in the book, *Real World Teambuilding Strategies That Work* (Insight Publishing).

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