The new way to blend learning

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The idea of blended learning is nothing new. Since the advent of e-learning systems, most organisational trainers have expanded their scope and made training more flexible by using a mix of physical classrooms and virtual learning management systems to complete their training agendas. While I think the use of technology in learning is great and can be highly effective, I don't think this process of blended learning as we know it today goes far enough to maximise learning. In fact, a 2008 Corporate Executive Board study showed that within a week, people forgot 70 per cent of what they learnt from a formal training event, and within a month that number jumped to 87 per cent[1].

The current blended processes used to facilitate our training agendas simply are not providing an acceptable ROI that businesses require, nor are they having a real impact on our employees and their job performance. I believe we need to take traditional blended learning into the modern age by giving it a makeover and redefining its practice, namely by blending in social learning.

By examining the 70:20:10 model of learning and development, we know that formal learning only accounts for 10 per cent of the way people learn. It's that pesky 90 per cent, that informal learning part of the equation, that we need to get a grasp on. But we know that people like to learn from other people and from their own and others' experiences, which is why these learning modalities account for 90 per cent of the 70:20:10 model. I strongly advocate that we start taking advantage of how people actually learn and leverage social learning methods to help us wrap our arms around informal learning practices and get greater value from our formal learning efforts.

By adding social learning opportunities to current formal blended training, companies can expand their training utility to encompass the other 90 per cent of how people learn. They can use social learning to extend the training beyond the once-and-done event by connecting people with cohorts before, during and after the event so that learners can tap into people's experiences. Companies can make learning more experiential or at the very least more application and process-based by asking employees to share stories with one another after the training course that focus on how concepts presented in training materials have actually helped them as they apply them to their jobs, or how they have actually worked in practice. Trainers and learners alike can share insights, personal examples, ideas, suspicions, hunches, and more by engaging with one another in targeted ways around the training topics. I call this approach *comprehensive blended learning*.

Savvy companies have already attempted to put this new blended learning into action, although they may not call it exactly by that name. Unfortunately, they do not always execute it well. →

In order to make blended learning more effective and comprehensive, you must bring social learning to the forefront of the process

References

1 *Sales Executive Council: Introduction to Talent Development* (PowerPoint presentation), Corporate Executive Board, 2008

2 "Building a Productive Learning Culture." *Learning Quarterly, Third Quarter,* CEB, 2014. http://ceb.uberflip.com/i/337397

All too often, I see companies fall into one of these scenarios.

Scenario 1: Recommend and release

Self-directed learning is gaining prominence in the training world, as more and more companies want to offer learning that mirrors how adults like to learn. An unintended consequence of this movement in a blended learning environment is a situation I call, 'recommend and release'. This scenario occurs when companies offer too many choices for self-directed activities that support the training agenda, encouraging or directing trainees to supplement their studies, then releasing them without providing any sort of direction or advice for how to do so. Say, for example, a trainer gives trainees a list of recommended learning resources to help them continue their studies after the synchronous training has concluded. With no accountability to take an action, some employees will simply skip the opportunity to continue learning and get back to their more immediate work demands. For those who do want to take action to further their understanding of the training, they are confronted with figuring out the best option. Should they go to the LMS or to an intranet site? Do they ask a question on a social media network or do they look for a book to help them? Do they search online for an answer or connect with a colleague by referencing an online expert finder? This abundance of options with no clear directions can leave people confused about where to even begin if they want to take further action. In this scenario, people typically take no action at all, either because they have no accountability to do so or because they feel paralysed from the overload of options.

Scenario 2: The drag and drop

The drag and drop occurs when a company spends time, effort and money on facilitating a formal training course or event in one system or location and then changes the learning environment to try to enable social learning. Trainers and learning leaders may think they have this covered by figuratively dragging learners from the LMS or classroom and dropping them into an enterprise social network that allows them to collaborate. They might even feel confident that this tactic will work because the social aspect is built right into the LMS, or because the social network is one the whole company has access to. Sadly, this is not usually the case. By removing people from the place where they initially met and learnt, companies create a disconnect between the learning activities in each system or location
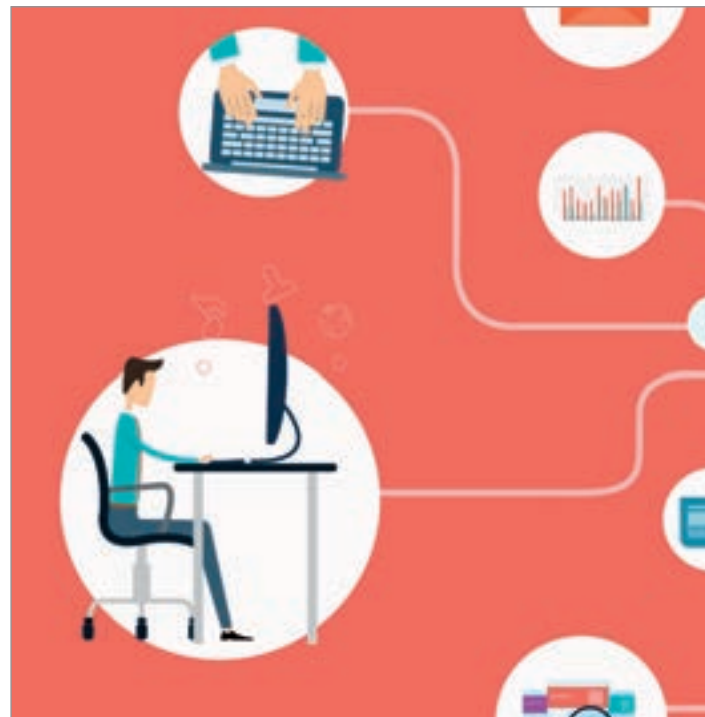
and form a barrier to people logging in and using the social system to extend the value of their training. People should not be treated like files on your computer; being placed in a 'drag and drop' scenario will negatively impact engagement and participation in productive social learning.

Scenario 3: Unfocused chattering

Unfocused chattering occurs when a trainer tries to use social learning without giving much thought as to what the desired learning behaviour or goals of the group should be and what training-related topics would be helpful for them to explore collaboratively. The trainer simply gathers everyone in a group online, tells them to ask each other questions and discuss what they learnt, and then leaves the results of what will happen to chance. The learners have the training or course in common, but they are not given instructions for how to use social learning technology to amplify their learning, nor are they prompted to share on a regular basis by the trainer because the trainer is not even paying attention any more. As a result, the learners either don't do anything and the group interactivity fizzles out, or one or two group leaders emerge and dominate the conversation and the direction of the group. While this type of unstructured interactivity isn't necessarily bad, there are very few instances where learners in this environment will engage in any sort of learning that is either related to, or in support of, their

training or that helps them perform better at work.

All the trainers I have ever met would never hold an in-person training session without giving major thought and consideration to all the details, like how the training will be conducted, who will facilitate it, what material will be delivered, and the like. So why would we except to treat social learning differently, give it little to no thought, and then expect to still get positive results? For productive social learning to occur in conjunction with our training curricula, we have to shift the way we approach the blended learning practice.

Bring social learning to the forefront

Social learning cannot be an afterthought to this new approach to blended learning. If it's treated like an appendage to your training, it will likely result in a wasted effort. Here's why: recent research by CEB's *Learning Quarterly: Building a Productive Learning Culture*[2] report showed that only 20 per cent of people are effective learners on their own. Without intensive work by the trainer to moderate the conversation and get people to share, the vast majority of people simply will not meaningfully participate or learn in this type of unstructured, learn-if-you-want social environment.

In order to make blended learning more effective and comprehensive, you must bring social learning to the forefront of the process. This means that blended learning should *start*

in a social learning environment that has the capability to pull in training courses and other e-learning content. In this way, social learning should permeate the entire process and play a role throughout the entire training progression. It cannot be viewed as an isolated activity.

You should plan for it the same way you plan for the formal, event-driven parts of your training. Social learning activities should aim to drive home concepts learnt during the training event, or to introduce new ones that will be covered later in the formal activities, like courses and books. To stimulate social learning, you must think of activities that will get people to share and collaborate. Activities can happen before or after your virtual class or e-learning course. It is to your advantage to offer a range of options so that you give participants several opportunities to engage.

Here are a few ideas on how you can get started:

- Before the course begins, create a plan for how you will blend or mix more formal, event-driven learning with social learning activities.
- Schedule tasks, polls, questions, reading assignments and more that reinforce lessons learnt or help introduce pertinent or peripheral concepts.
- Use a social learning activity after a formal training event to prompt people to share their thoughts, suspicions, experiences, and so on related to that topic.

Table 1. New hire training results

	ILT only	With comprehensive blended learning
Final exam scores (first attempt)	80.75 per cent	91.73 per cent
Final exam scores (second attempt)	85.90 per cent	95.73 per cent
I would recommend this course to others. (5-point scale)	4.56	4.84
This course will help me be more efficient, effective or productive in my work. (5-point scale)	4.51	4.84
Time saved	-------	4 hours per participant due to pre-work
Money saved	-------	$270,000 due to reduced travel costs

- Ask participants to read a resource related to your training to introduce a topic or concept and then respond to some pre-formed questions.
- Prompt people to answer questions like: In your experience, how do the concepts work in action? Are there any concepts that don't? What are your thoughts on how these concepts can be used in your role?
- Use deadlines for social learning activities as a way to increase the accountability and ensure that participants will respond and engage in a timely manner.
- Ask participants to take a concept learnt in the training and apply it on the job by a certain date. Then have them relay the results to the group. This will help generate conversation and allow people to share what went right and what went wrong as they put concepts into practice.

My company recently worked with a Fortune 500 technology company that provides a great example of how you can bring social learning to the forefront and make it an integral part of comprehensive blended learning. The company wanted to build a learning environment where newly hired technical support engineers could learn from one another, reference materials, and discuss concepts from the training course in the context of their jobs. They wanted their training to help employees solve customer problems quickly and efficiently. To accomplish this, they implemented a more comprehensive type of blending learning to support their new hire training curricula.

This forward-thinking company blended online instructor-led training with structured social learning activities, which allowed them to leverage a well-rounded learning strategy right from the start. They gave equal thought and preparation to each type of learning and were mindful of how both types would work together to achieve training goals. They used social learning technology as the foundation for the learning that occurred, which created a structured environment where trainers set learning goals, identified core competencies that would be impacted, and built a living library filled with resources and contextual conversations. They planned a well-formed agenda that wrapped meaningful and purposeful social learning activities around the formal learning experience before, during, and after their two-week training events.

Blending learning in this manner allowed this organisation to transform training into a more contextual and continuous learning process. It also provided structure for asynchronous online collaboration and conversations. Instructors had a new way to assign work, provide resources, monitor progress, check understanding, and solicit interaction and feedback. Conversely, students could ask questions, contribute to discussions, and document assignment progress. The company noted that passive attendance could not mask actual progression through the material when they used social learning, and their results prove that (see Table 1). They also saved roughly $270,000 by not having to pay for travel for people to attend a training course in person.

As demonstrated by this Fortune 500 technology company, going beyond current blended learning and training practices and creating a more comprehensive learning environment delivers impactful results and produces learning that is more likely to help employees' work performance. This company not only saw higher exam scores when they blended social learning into their training from the beginning, but they also saved time and money. All three results impact the business and provide positive ROI that can show the true effects of social learning.

I think our industry can progress beyond just using technology to deliver only portions of training. By re-examining the elements we use to blend our learning, we can achieve more holistic and impactful results. We can maximise the learning we have set out to attain by providing training that spans the 70:20:10 continuum. When learning is maximised and concepts can be applied, our employees are better equipped to bring our organisations success. **TJ**

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