Handling objections
One of the most common objections to the razzmatazz about blended learning is that it's nothing new - blending is something we have always done. There is obviously some truth in this, Inside Learning Technologies because we can probably all think of some examples of training interventions that have successfully combined a variety of media. But to maintain that this has been in any way the norm is clearly wide of the mark. Most learning, of course, is informal - we don't even know that it is happening. When it is structured and formalised, it's most likely to be wholly on-job, if not wholly in the classroom, if not wholly online. Blending has been (and still is) very much the exception, not the rule. That's not surprising because blending is a hassle, it takes more planning and more co-ordination.

Cynics may also claim that blended learning is just a rebranding exercise, carried out by e-learning vendors who have hit upon hard times after the bursting of the dotcom bubble. Again, there is something to be said for this view. Most companies who claim to be in the blended learning business used to be - you guessed it - e-learning companies, not classroom trainers. They even tried to make the term blended learning their own, referring to it as a mix of 'e-learning and traditional methods'. This definition still dominates, even though it is unhelpfully restrictive, not to say condescending about the so-called 'traditional' methods.

The e-learning community may retaliate by claiming that blended learning is in fact a sop to the classroom community, allowing them a piece of the action in a world of learning that will be increasingly dominated by the computer. This view is hard to justify. Computers are playing an increasing role in learning, but have major limitations, as we shall see. Even the most optimistic forecasts for e-learning don't see it overtaking the classroom as a training method.

Others object to blended learning not for what it means in theory but for how it is often applied in practice, i.e. use the classroom for anything that involves people and computers for the boring stuff. In his book Lessons in Learning, e-Learning and Training, Roger Schank laments that "the part that is assigned to e-learning is the rote learning part - the facts followed by the answers. That stuff doesn't stick, and for the most part trainees hate it. When you hear the word 'blended', run." Now Roger may be right - he often is - but for me what he says is really an argument for blending more effectively; being a brighter blender. Very much the point of this book.

Coming To Terms With Blended Learning
A few years ago, I thought I had a pretty good understanding of what blended learning was about - you know, combining online and traditional elements to build courses that used the best of the old and the new. That is, until I sat at breakfast watching my wife open her Open University package - then I realised that not only was I unduly restrictive in my definition of what blended learning meant, but that when it came to imaginative combinations of ingredients, I was a complete amateur. Out of the box came workbooks, good old-fashioned text books, cassettes containing interviews, lectures and extracts from pieces of music, and books full of nothing but full-colour pictures. Then there were the TV programmes that were aired in the middle of the night for you to record and watch later, phone tutorials with your
personal tutor, occasional group sessions with local members of your course and, to
top it all, the one-week summer school. In this instance there wasn't a single online
element (although subsequently, discussion forums have been added), but I defy
anyone to say that this wasn't a first class example of blended learning: a broad
range of media was used to present information, there were numerous self-study
activities, opportunities to seek expert advice and a chance to collaborate with fellow
learners (in the case of the latter, probably not enough to satisfy most learners, but
a reasonable attempt given the budget). Well done the OU.

In coming to terms with blended learning, it's helpful to start with what it is not. First
of all, it is not providing learners with choices of how to undergo a piece of training -
you can have e-learning or, if you prefer, the classroom.

Not only are learners failing to get a blended solution (which means they get all the
disadvantages of a single method, as well as the advantages, whereas a blend can
smooth out the rough edges), but you're having to pay to implement two solutions
instead of one. A blended solution is also not a way of combining a number of very
similar elements, say books, videos and CD-ROMs. The learner gets some variety in
their self-study, but self-study is as far as it goes. A successful blended solution is
like a balanced meal, combining a range of ingredients, each of which has a unique
purpose.

I would define blended learning as an approach to the design of learning
interventions which mixes learning media and methods appropriately, to achieve
solutions which are both effective and efficient. It's easy to create blends that are
effective, if you throw enough resources at the job. Similarly, it's easy to be efficient
and conserve resources, if you let quality go down the pan. The challenge for the
designer is to create solutions that are both effective and practical, given the
inevitable resource limitations that we all work under.

Blended learning also takes account of differences in learning objectives, the
preferences of learners and the practicalities of the particular situation. If you're not
sensitive to these differences, the chances are you'll come up with the same familiar
solution all the time, one that you are comfortable with but that doesn't necessarily
deliver for learners. A good example is the classic 'classroom sandwich', in which a
classroom course is topped and tailed with a little e-learning. This may be the right
method in some situations; in others it could just be a sop to the classroom trainers.

Creating the right blends is a tough task for the 21st century trainer, because as
soon as we started networking computers together we created a whole range of new
options (online self-study, virtual classrooms, discussion forums, chat rooms and
email support, not to mention Podcasts and other mobile solutions), each of which
has to be considered alongside more than a dozen existing options.

They have to be considered because they may be more effective or more efficient for
your particular mix of learning objectives, target audiences and resource constraints.
What we don't need are unnecessary complications like having to include something
online in the mix when it isn't needed, or having to include a non-online option when
we're getting all we need from our various online options. Not to mention the fact
that we don't need a blend at all for the vast majority of short courses. Now there's a
thought.
What Makes Good Learning?
To conclude this, merely the first step in our quest for better blends for better learning, I thought it would be useful to establish some measures of success. What exactly is good learning? Would we know it if we saw it? Now we all have our own ideas on this one, but mine are the ones that count here, because these are my fingers on the keyboard.

Effective learning, at least as far as adults are concerned and in the context of their work, more than anything needs to be relevant. When it's relevant, it matters; it where it takes place and how long it makes a difference to their job performance or to their job prospects. Most open learning materials, made freely available over an organisation's intranet or in an open learning centre, are insufficiently relevant, which is why they are rarely used. Relevance is important, because if you get this right, your learner is likely to be engaged, without a lot of fancy extras.

Relevance can be increased by the way that you design a learning intervention: build on the learner's existing knowledge, use plenty of examples that relate directly to the learner's work experience, make frequent use of stories and anecdotes. All of these techniques are inductive in nature - they move from the specific to the general, from the concrete to the theoretical. Learners like this, because by and large they struggle to find theory relevant.

Adult learners also like to be in control. They like to determine when learning takes place (ideally just before it's needed), Sometimes small chunks are best, cookbook@saffroninteractive.com sometimes sustained immersion.

Sometimes they like to whip through at speed, sometimes to labour over each point. Being in control also includes the ability to ask questions whenever you want, whether that's of tutors or fellow learners; which is why pure self-study can sometimes be a let down - it denies the learner the fundamental right of questioning.

Finally, when they're at work, adults are more interested in 'knowing how' than 'knowing that'. They want skills that they can employ to their advantage in their jobs, and there's only one way to develop skills. "How do you get to Carnegie Hall?" asked the tourist in New York. "Practice," came the quick-witted response.

Most training falls down because it fails to provide adequate opportunities for practice. It spends two days teaching you how to handle customer complaints, then allows you maybe ten minutes to try this out with a colleague. Just long enough, in fact, for you to realise how bad you are. Trainers could learn from tennis coaches. They spend a few minutes demonstrating the correct strokes, then reinforce these over thousands of hours of repetitive practice.

As we shall see in subsequent articles, almost any training method can contribute something useful in terms of learning effectiveness; equally, every method has inherent weaknesses which are capable of getting in the way. Often, the only way of satisfying every criterion for 'good learning' is to use a bit of this and a bit of that, which is where we came in. Before we explore this possibility in more detail, a word of warning. Getting the right blend is not enough, you also have to design and implement it well. Thomas L. Russell undertook an analysis of more than 350 studies conducted over the past 50 years, each attempting to compare the effectiveness of one learning medium with another. The title of Russell's book is The No Significant
Difference Phenomenon, which says it all. His conclusion? It's not what you do, it's the way that you do it.

*The article has been taken from 'The Blended Learning Cook Book' written by Clive Shepherd, e-Learning Director for the Training Foundation, in collaboration with Saffron Interactive.*

**About the Author**

Clive Shepherd is Director of e-Learning for The Training Foundation. He developed his interest in interactive media at American Express in the early eighties, where he was Director, Training and Creative Services. He was co-founder of both VPS Interactive and Epic Interactive Media Company, now Epic Group plc, where he played leading roles in the management, creative and technical sides of the business. Since 1997 Clive has worked with a number of large public and private sector organisations on the application of online technology to learning and employee communications.

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