WHERE ARE ALL THE BLENDED LEARNING DESIGNERS?

Mark Harrison raves about blended learning...and rants about the lack of designers.

Hard to believe, but it's been over 15 years since the concept of blended learning was first introduced. Most people in the world of learning and development are aware of it and few question its value. Yet despite this, it's incredibly hard to find anyone resembling a blended learning designer in the corporate landscape. Why is this?

I've been asking myself – and others – that question. Caleb Foster, Head of Learning Technology & MI at Compass Group, thinks it is partly down to the prevailing conservative instinct: "It's a brave person to say I can deliver it smarter. The default is *let's get together and do a classroom course.*"

When we look in the mirror, are L&D more bastions of conservatism or progression?

Some organisations push things like virtual classrooms and social learning quite strongly but even then everything is still very silo-ed. Some well-known IT giants still have a tendency to offer sheep dip workshops rather than blended solutions. It feels like the different camps are still having difficulties in working together even though now (as compared to the past) they are much more on speaking terms!

This was confirmed in a survey that City & Guilds Kineo conducted with the Oxford Group, which showed that only 26% of organisations polled (all of whom were a relatively self-selecting group) had a role specifically designated to something resembling blended learning. A truly representative survey of every firm in the UK

would probably come up with a lower percentage.

The key issue is a lack of general expertise. Experts exist in each area of learning delivery but few seem to be able to cross over into other areas. I seldom find workshop designers writing digital learning content and vice versa. The CG Kineo/Oxford Group survey indicated that 52% have none or very few people in their organisation with the skills and experience to design blended solutions.

When asked what are the key challenges faced in developing and implementing blended solutions, over 50% of respondents cited lack of internal expertise to commission or develop blended solutions. This chimes with last month's

Towards Maturity Benchmarking report, which showed 49% of L&D professionals rate themselves as skilled in blended learning. I hope the other 51% aren't designing your blend at the moment.

As a result there are many instances of programmes that involve a wide range of learning resources but few genuinely represent seamless blends of offline and online activity. The silos remain in place, prompting a few frustrated by the world order to take quite extreme positions, notably the 'resources not courses' lobby – and yes, we've been flying that flag longer than most.

A well-designed blend should provide both the structure that some learners need and the flexibility and learner centricity that others require. A set of engaging resources is an exciting and eye-catching option but without a master plan (created by a smart blended designer) it can just lead to confusion for some of the target audience.

So, the training world really needs some more imaginative thinkers in this space who have the clout and the expertise to transform the way we train our people. How will this happen?

L&D: YOU NEED SOME TRAINING

The obvious starting point lies in greater awareness and training in both blended design and all the other areas of learning delivery that remain a mystery to the learning practitioner. It is not surprising that trainers with years of classroom delivery experience are going to be quite apprehensive incorporating e-learning or other forms of learning technology into their solutions and the same applies to e-learning designers who are have little direct experience of trying to engage a group of people in a workshop.

WHAT SHOULD WE DO ABOUT IT?

It is this lack of experience in devising new delivery options that is the challenge to most people within L&D teams. I have been very fortunate, having spent enough time in my early working life delivering face-to-face workshops, to be comfortable with this medium . At the same time I have now spent three decades in the world of digital learning.

Blends are often put together (according to the CG Kineo and Oxford Group survey) by face-to-face trainers (in 48% of organisations) or e-learning designers (in 57%). Just less than half said they are generalist-learning consultants doing the job. So, at best you're getting a half-thought-through solution.

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>
> *Caleb Foster, Compass Group*

It's hard enough that blended learning is new territory for many trainers, coaches and e-learning practitioners. It makes it doubly hard when you get stakeholders who can easily get spooked by the complexity of solution and the required changes necessary to make a blend effective.

Caleb Foster from Compass confirms this: "Changing the way things are done is seen as a leap of faith for many stakeholders. For key areas like compliance the idea of optional paths for learners is conceptually a real barrier. There is always the fear of 'what if we can't prove they have learnt this'. Corporates are generally driven by data."

THE VISION THING

One big challenge though for all blends is presenting them clearly and engagingly enough to internal clients. It's a big hurdle in getting blended learning adopted.

Foster confirms this: "Visualising a blend is very hard. The Line can get the concept of e-learning and classrooms but they don't always get how the two will operate in tandem. They don't block the ideas but there is the danger they nod through blends which they don't really fully support when they are implemented."

The mistake is to present things as complex documents that no-one will read. Learner journeys portrayed visually will be more effective. If you have a highly flexible, learner centric blend, you can present a few journeys to show how different the experience can be according to the choices the learners make.

Not many people who are assigned the role of blended learning designer know what these learner stories should look like, or how to tell them so stakeholders will get it. Not having good models to follow deters many from presenting their ideas effectively.

WE CAN FIX THIS

So, a lot of the problems can be put down to the lack of required expertise and tools and templates. It doesn't take much to rectify this.

To help, City & Guilds Kineo will be sharing in the New Year a series of new video guides on digital learning design and blended solutions. They'll be on our website and on YouTube, so watch out for them.

Blended Learning is not complex. If we can do more things together to grow these blended learning skills and provide reasonable and effective models for people to follow, maybe in 2015 the lesser spotted blended learning designer may finally become a common breed.

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