Solutions to the Top 10 Challenges of Blended Learning
InSync Training: Your Source for Blended Learning and Virtual Design and Delivery

InSync Training sets standards for virtual learning, specializing in developing the best training professionals for your organization.

InSync Training is the acknowledged leader in the virtual training design and delivery field—we have been in the business of virtual training delivery since 1999, and are routinely identified as the “go-to” vendor for expertise in this field. InSync provides accredited, comprehensive live and interactive online training solutions, enabling learning and development professionals and organizations to realize the full potential of individual and organizational growth by leveraging the live online environment.

InSync’s curriculum offerings provide its clients with the skills required to become knowledgeable, effective, and dynamic instructional experts in the virtual classroom. We help learning and development professionals understand the world of virtual training, empowering them with the skills to support their organization’s growth.

Our passion lies in improving the effectiveness of your live online learning initiatives, allowing your organization to reach its potential.

We work with organizations from all sectors, global corporations in numerous industries (including energy and utilities, financial, government, healthcare, information technology, manufacturing, medical devices, oil and gas, software development, and telecommunications).

Our ethos is “Reaching Learners Globally” which we do with our global team based in the USA and Europe.

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Solutions to the Top 10 Challenges of Blended Learning

Introduction

With the expansion of the global workforce, and the continuous shifting of global economic factors, the time for blended learning has arrived. A solid blended learning design makes sense instructionally and economically. But how do we make sure we do it right? What are the hidden challenges that can create a roadblock to success before we even roll out the program?

This whitepaper addresses the strategies and solutions for anticipating and minimizing the most common challenges when designing and implementing a blended learning solution, including technical, organizational, and instructional challenges.

The term “blended learning” is used in such disparate ways among learning professionals that it has begun to lose its meaning. In most cases, what is labeled “blended learning” is typically one topic, offered in numerous ways, or a hodgepodge of different training offerings under the same topical umbrella.
What blended learning should mean is:

*Using the best delivery methodology(ies) available for a specific objective, including online, classroom-based instruction, electronic performance support, paper-based, and formalized or informal on-the-job solutions.*

This is the definition of blended learning referenced throughout this whitepaper.

We’ll discuss challenges associated with blended learning in three categories: technology challenges, organizational challenges, and instructional/design challenges. We’ll also provide some examples that will help to identify if there is evidence of a particular challenge in your organization.

### Technology Challenges

1. Ensuring your participants can be successful using the technology.
2. Resisting the urge to use technology simply because it is available.

### Organizational Challenges

3. Overcoming the idea that blended learning is not as effective as traditional face-to-face learning.
4. Redefining the role of the facilitator.
5. Managing and monitoring participant progress.

### Instructional/Design Challenges

6. Looking at HOW to teach, not just WHAT to teach.
7. Matching the best delivery medium to the performance objective.
8. Keeping online offerings interactive rather than just “talking at” participants.
9. Ensuring participant commitment and follow through with “non-live” elements.
10. Ensuring all the elements of the blend are coordinated.
TECHNOLOGY CHALLENGES

The technology challenges addressed here are not just about getting technology to work on networks (though that is an important first step), rather, they are concerned with ensuring the success of the program by utilizing and supporting appropriate technologies.

Challenge #1 - Ensuring participants can be successful using the technology

As learning technologies become more accessible, a typical response is to use them all. But, just because we can be successful creating content, doesn’t mean our participants can be successful using it. Putting out too much technology too quickly makes blended learning programs appear ‘trendy’, and participants may not take them seriously.

Also, roadblocks can become detours – meaning that if participants run into technical difficulties that cannot be easily fixed, the content may be abandoned completely. This lack of technical success can lead to a lack of instructional success, and participants won’t return.

Challenge #1 - Solution

To minimize the impact of this challenge, don’t introduce all of the available technologies at once, and use the simplest technology possible to make your point. For example, if your web conferences are typically online conference calls, do you need to include the virtual classroom? Sometimes a telephone by itself is just as effective, and less technologically impactful. Make sure trained support is available for each technology (this is often overlooked) and that the facilitator has the answers to the most common problems.

Example and Evidence

Your organization has implemented a new virtual training program using a virtual classroom. You are also implementing a new learning management system to manage all of your training content and programs. Evidence participants are experiencing roadblocks to successful utilization of the technology includes:

- Participants indicate they are not able to access the virtual classroom. Is this a tech issue or a communications problem? Was the incorrect link was sent out?
- The LMS indicates self-directed work is not being completed. Is this an LMS issue? Or a digital content issue?
- Unexpected increase in IT help desk inquiries regarding the program. You should expect some calls – but how many is too many?
- Participants aren’t showing up for class, or not doing the self-directed work, and blaming the technology.
- Feedback from participants regarding the technology is negative. Perhaps the most obvious evidence, but if you don’t ask for the feedback, you won’t get it.
Challenge #2 - Resisting the urge to use technology simply because it is available

Organizations often implement technologies because they want to rush their returns on investment. Unfortunately, the “We’ve got it, so use it” mentality can drive weak initiatives, resulting in overly-complicated designs that don’t meet learning objectives.

Challenge #2 - Solution

Resist the temptation to redesign all of your content to the latest learning technology. (“By the end of the year, all of our content will be online in XXX format.”) Start with smaller initiatives, and once the technology works, build on that success, and incorporate lessons learned.

Example and Evidence

Your organization has just purchased a new virtual classroom platform, video conferencing system, and elearning development software. Evidence your organization is not using the technology appropriately includes:

- The management team has asked the training group to convert all face-to-face programs to a blended format by the end of the year.
- Training professionals with limited experience with blended learning design and development are charged with ensuring the technology investments are worthwhile.
- High-profile training programs are identified to be converted to blended learning first, creating a high-risk project.
ORGANIZATIONAL CHALLENGES

Management often agrees that blended learning is the correct direction for training initiatives. The problem is not organizational enthusiasm – the problem is a lack of organizational understanding that this is a complex process that needs thought beyond an individual program.

Challenge #3 - Overcoming the idea that blended learning is not as effective as traditional classroom training

Participants are attracted to the traditional classroom because they understand that they can be successful learners. They understand their roles, and what is required as far as behavior, effort, and participation. Online learning technologies change these expectations, and the safety net is taken away. Managers often don’t realize the effort it takes for a self-directed program to be successful, and facilitators often don’t have the confidence to fully support the program. These factors, left unaddressed, often result in a failed program.

Challenge #3 - Solution

Orientation is the key to overcoming this obstacle. Participants should have an introduction to the entire experience – including expectations about how to install and use technology, and participation and attendance/completion requirements. Managers should have an orientation about what their employees will be experiencing, and how the managers can help to ensure learning takes place.

Early programs should be launched using facilitators who buy into the concept – that is more important than using the facilitator most familiar with the topic in the classroom.

Example and Evidence

Your training group has announced its intention to implement blended learning for competency training, to include virtual classrooms, elearning, and online assessment.

Evidence your organization is not convinced that blended learning is as effective as traditional classroom training includes:

• Low enrollment, or no departments volunteering to be early adopters of the program.
• Negative back-channel chatter about how elearning ‘doesn’t work.’
• Potential participants asking if they can watch recordings or indicating the will to wait for the ‘real class’ in a traditional setting.
**Challenge #4 - Redefining the role of the facilitator**

An active and participative instructor can be the key to blended learning success, but we need to remember that blended learning is far from the comfort zone of the traditional classroom. It takes more time to prepare for and deliver a blended program (especially programs that take weeks or months to complete). As a result, each piece of the program (classroom, self-paced, virtual classroom) are treated as individual sessions, instead of parts of a larger whole.

**Challenge #4 - Solution**

Prepare facilitators by immersing them in a blended learning program so they fully understand the participant experience. A team teaching approach, using another facilitator or an online learning producer, can help to maintain energy and interest, and ensure all details are addressed. It is also critical that facilitators understand that the ‘most live’ (i.e.: classroom) component of the blend is not more important than the self-directed components. For a blend to be successful, each individual component needs to be treated as critical.

[Click here to learn more about how a producer can support your blend.](#)

**Example and Evidence**

A blended learning program is being developed to replace the existing New Hire Training program. It will roll out in two months at 14 sites across the world.

Evidence your facilitators are not ready to manage the blend includes:

- Facilitators have not participated in blended learning programs as a learner.
- Facilitors have not been involved with the development process.
- Facilitators have not received any training to deliver content in a blended format.
- Producers, or assistant facilitators, have not been assigned to support the blend.
**Challenge #5 - Managing and monitoring participant progress**

Trying to keep track of all the pieces can be the most difficult challenge to address. If we don’t, participants can become ‘lost in cyberspace’ because they don’t have a strong understanding of what they have completed. Self-paced components are viewed as being unimportant because they don’t seem to be tracked.

**Challenge #5 - Solution**

It is important that organizations assess all components of a blend to ensure completion. Items that appear to be optional will generally not be completed – assessment is one of the critical success factors to overcome this challenge. Assessment results can be monitored, tracked, and used to ascertain that all requirements have been met. Also, facilitators or course managers should stay in contact with participants to ensure that expectations are understood.

**Example and Evidence**

As a part of the blended programs that are being implemented in your organization a Learning Management System (LMS) has been purchased to organize and track the requirements for the programs.

Evidence your organization does not have the systems in place to monitor participants’ progress in a blend includes:

- The LMS administrator is not working with the team responsible for blended learning design.
- A plan for tracking and assessing all components of a blend was not designed as part of the process, or the plan was not implemented.
- Facilitators are not requiring all lessons of a blend, including self-directed work, be completed.
- Participants are providing feedback they don’t understand what work needs to be completed by when.
INSTRUCTIONAL/DESIGN CHALLENGES

When learning technologies are introduced, attention is often paid to the technology implementation – while the actual design of appropriate content is left with too little time and budget to create a successful program.

Challenge #6 - Looking at how to teach, as well as what to teach

“Strategy” meetings about moving content online often have one or two potential foci: “How do we get all of our content online” or “Let’s get X online by next week.” The conversation is about “How” or “What,” but rarely both. This results in a less than optimal delivery.

Challenge #6 - Solution

Don’t predetermine the delivery answer for a particular program. Looking to put your Customer Service program online? Go through a thoughtful design process, and determine what pieces may require face-to-face time and what pieces require collaboration. If, after the process is over, you realize that this content is not appropriate for online or blended delivery, don’t be disappointed. Call it a success because you have not created bad training.

Give yourself enough time and make sure you bring the right players to the table. And remember, technology is a tool – the people need to get it done.

Example and Evidence

Your instructional design team has been tasked with converting three traditionally delivered programs to a blended learning environment. Evidence your organization may run into obstacles during this process includes:

- The team, consisting of experts, project sponsors, facilitators, and instructional designers, have different expectations of the program outcomes. Some want to use technology because they think they will save money, or because it is trendy.
- There is a lack of understanding concerning what technology can accomplish and how easily content can be converted; the perception is that if the content exists, content can be dropped into instructional technology.
- A needs analysis was not conducted to determine if the selected programs were the most appropriate for blended learning:
  - Too high risk/exposure for early conversion.
  - Content may not lend itself to blended learning technology.
Challenge #7 - Matching the best delivery medium to the performance objective

Training teams often don’t have the time or experience to create great blended programs. Because of this, it has become acceptable to treat skill or behavioral objectives as we would treat a knowledge objective. (You don’t believe this? How often do you hear about skill objectives being taught in the virtual classroom and session is then recorded for anyone who wasn’t able to attend? Watching a recorded session is rarely an appropriate treatment of a skill-based objective – yet we do it all of the time.) When this happens, the training technologies are blamed, when it was really a lack of instructional design.

Challenge #7 - Solution

Technology selection should be the last step of the design process. Instructional designers need to go through a thorough evaluation to validate learning objectives and determine appropriate assessment methodologies, before determining how to deliver content for each learning objective. Don’t try to determine if you can deliver your employee orientation content online, look at each learning objective of the program individually. If you can assess the objective in a self-paced format, you can probably deliver the content in a self-paced format. If you need to assess in a live setting, then the content for that objective needs to be delivered in a virtual classroom, or perhaps even a traditional classroom. This process is what determines what your blend will look like, and what technologies should be included.

A great tool for matching delivery mediums to performance objectives is Bloom’s Digital Taxonomy. Click the link for information on how to use that tool.

Example and Evidence

Your instructional design team has been tasked with converting three traditionally delivered programs to a blended learning environment. Evidence your organization is not correctly implementing blended learning includes:

- There is a ‘one-size-fits-all’ philosophy with regard to delivery mediums; either all virtual classroom, all eLearning, or all traditional classroom.
- There is a desire to teach all content all ways, in order to appeal to a multiple learning-preference approach.
- The blended development plan does not include time or resources to redesign content.
- The design team has not been trained in blended learning design techniques.
- Facilitator lectures through all content in live lessons, even if the content was introduced in self-paced lessons.
Challenge #8 - Keeping online offerings interactive rather than just “talking at” participants

Let’s face it, too much lecture, reading, or content in ANY format (including the traditional classroom) is disengaging. The medium becomes the message – and after a while even the most motivated participant has a difficult time retaining information.

Challenge #8 - Solution

When designing for self-paced learning for knowledge objectives, consider a 12-20 minute maximum per topic or module. If you have content that requires more than 12 minutes of treatment, try to find a way for the learner to save their work, and come back later. (If you are wondering where 12 minutes comes from, it’s the time between commercial breaks on network television. A large part of our population has been trained to keep concentration at least this long.)

For virtual classroom interactions, find a way for participants to do something (click on a green check mark, send a chat, or participate in a breakout exercise) every 3-5 minutes. If you have a virtual lecture that goes more than five minutes, break it up with polling or Q&A.

Example and Evidence

Your organization has implemented a new blended training program. The content has been designed well, and has been optimized for the blended environment. The time has come for you (as the facilitator) to deliver the first delivery of the program.

Evidence you are not ready to facilitate a blended learning program includes:

• You lecture through all content in live lessons, even if the content was introduced in self-paced lessons.
• Interactions are skipped in favor of lecturing.
• Focus in live sessions is on ‘finishing’ the slides, not on comprehension of content.
• eLearning lessons feel too long and are too text heavy.
• Participants can leave virtual lessons and the facilitator doesn’t realize they are gone.
Challenge #9 - Ensuring participant commitment and follow-through with “non-live” elements

Participants (and managers) tend to pay the most attention to the live component of a blend. Self-paced work is viewed as optional. Facilitators often reinforce this by re-teaching self-paced work in the live classroom.

In a blended environment, this causes problems. The money invested in creating quality self-paced components is wasted, and precious live time set aside for collaboration in the virtual classroom is reduced in favor of teaching content that should have been mastered with the self-paced work.

Challenge #9 - Solution

When creating a blend, realistically look at the content in the context of your audience. Do you think that your sales force will realistically complete 12 hours of self-paced work prior to a live session? If not, don’t make the investment.

Start smaller and design more live components. When you do include self-paced content, include stringent assessments. Make sure participants know about the assessments, and send the message that they will not be able to move on to live sessions unless the assessments are successfully completed.

Then, enforce the requirement. As soon as you let one participant ‘slide’, you have sent the message to everyone that self-paced work is not required.

Ensure everyone understands the requirements by including a “Learning Contract” (change the name as you think best!) that is reviewed by the participant and his/her supervisor, so everyone understands the full requirements of the program.

Example and Evidence

Your organization has implemented a new blended training program, with the knowledge components delivered via eLearning.

Evidence your facilitators and participants may not be ready to participate in this blended learning program includes:

• When asked if it is acceptable to skip an eLearning assignment, the facilitator says “Yes.”

• Participants making the assumptions that, if a piece of self-paced content were truly important, the facilitator will cover it in the live lesson.

• The facilitator, concerned that participants did not complete the self-paced work, covers the content in the live lesson, degrading the design of the live lesson.

• The blended learning program does not have a way to track completion of all parts of the blend.

• Supervisors do not fully realize the full time commitment required by blended learning.
**Challenge #10 - Ensuring all the elements of the blend are coordinated**

Blended programs can be complex and often last many weeks or months. Without the proper coordination and oversight, participants will tend to complete the ‘easy’ parts of the blend, or only participate in the scheduled (read: LIVE) components.

Other potential issues with a complex blend is that participants will not read everything they receive, so do not become aware of requirements, and the facilitator may be overwhelmed by the amount of items that need to be managed.

**Challenge #10 - Solution**

A visual course map (see example below) with a suggested schedule for self-paced work can help participants get organized. This can be accomplished on a course web site, which also has all of the links for content, virtual classroom, and materials. Contact information for the facilitator and technical support should be easy to find on this page.

Also, a Frequently Asked Questions section can provide a forum for participants to work through logistical and technical roadblocks.

Make sure you have a solid communication plan – with template content and dates for each communication – keep a copy of each email on the course web page so participants can access when they are away from their primary computers.

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**Example and Evidence**

Your organization has implemented a new blended training program that is delivered to participants over a period of eight weeks.

Evidence your organization, facilitators and participants may not be ready to participate in this blended learning program includes:

- A lack of communication about the requirements of the blend, especially the self-paced lessons.
- The facilitator does not have a full understanding of the lessons that are not delivered in the live format.
- Supervisors do not fully realize the necessary time commitment required by blended learning.
SAMPLE COURSE MAP

The course map provides an overview of the entire blended learning curriculum and can be used as a checklist by participants to track completion of the various modules and presentations, as well as serve as an effective time management aid.

The map can potentially have several dimensions. A single-dimensional version can be printed for the participant guide, and a hyper-linked version can be created for a course website.

Click here for more information on how to create and use a course map.

CONCLUSION

The success of any blended learning implementation is determined in the planning stage. When you plan for technical, organizational, and instructional challenges, your organization will reap the benefits of investing the time and resources in creating a well-equipped workforce.
InSync Training Blended Learning Resources

Blended Learning Instructional Design: A Modern Approach

As instructional designers we are constantly being bombarded with new technologies and new trends. It's difficult to distinguish which are fads, and which are worthy of our time and resources. There also seems to be the perception that you can teach any content using any technology, which is hardly the case.

So what's the solution? From an instructional design perspective we should be looking to develop much more of a blended program rather than trying to fit all content into one convenient delivery modality. This whitepaper will provide some tips on how to plan and create a successful blended program.

Training On The Edge: Staying Ahead Of The Trends

In this whitepaper we will examine the outlook for the modern workplace for the next five years, as well as four key trends associated with adapting training to the new context. As these trends play out, we need to consider how to implement a culture change in our training organizations and identify some of the challenges these changes will bring.

The four trends we'll explore are:

- Trend 1 - Blended Learning and Flipping the Classroom
- Trend 2 - Collaboration as a Competency
- Trend 3 - Cognitive Educational Technology
- Trend 4 - Blurring the Lines Between Work and Learning

We'll also explore the personality of the modern work force, especially intergenerational dynamics, as well as the context in which our learners are, and will be, working.

Blended Learning Design Certificate

Do you want to maximize training opportunities while minimizing costs? After a decade of ineffective programs, organizations are looking for instructional design techniques to create blended programs that meet, or even exceed, the results achieved in more traditional settings. The Blended Learning Design Certificate course provides those techniques.

Currently trending in the blended learning design space are two concepts: How to "flip the classroom" to maximize valuable collaboration time, and how to apply the latest thinking on Bloom's Taxonomy to determine how best to deliver content in this new environment. This course will examine both of these concepts and their relationship to blended learning. The application of these concepts will make your training programs as impactful as possible, and help you get the most out of your technology investments.

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About The Author – Jennifer Hofmann

Jennifer Hofmann is the president of InSync Training, LLC, a consulting firm that specializes in the design and delivery of virtual and blended learning. Featured in Forbes Most Powerful Women issue (June 16, 2014) as a **New England Women Business Leader**, she has led InSync Training to the Inc. 5000 as the 10th Fastest Growing Education Company in the US (2013).

Hofmann is a recognized thought leader in the field of synchronous learning. She is the author of *The Synchronous Trainer’s Survival Guide: Facilitating Successful Live and Online Courses, Meetings and Events* (Pfeiffer, 2003), *Live and Online! Tips, Techniques, and Ready-To-Use Activities for the Virtual Classroom* (Pfeiffer, 2004), and *How To Design For The Live Online Classroom: Creating Great Interactive and Collaborative Training Using Web Conferencing* (Brandon Hall, 2005). Additionally, she is a chapter contributor to *The Handbook of Blended Learning* (Pfeiffer, 2006), *TheAMA Handbook of E-Learning* (The American Management Association, 2003), and *The ASTD Handbook for Workplace Learning Professionals* (ASTD, 2008 and 2014). She has co-authored, with Dr. Nanette Miner, *Tailored Learning: Designing the Blend That Fits* (ASTD, 2009), a book focused on taking advantage of distributed technologies to create the best blended training solution possible.


Follow Jennifer Hofmann at her blog, *Body Language In The Bandwidth* at [http://blog.insynctraining.com](http://blog.insynctraining.com) or on Twitter @InSyncJennifer.
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NEW ENGLAND
WOMEN BUSINESS LEADERS
As Seen In... Forbes, June 16, 2014

Virtual Classroom Experts Maximize Impact, ROI

InSync Training

Corporate employers invest more than $160 billion annually in employee training. Much of that amount is spent on live virtual-training programs, particularly for workforces spread across the globe.

Not all webinars, however, are created equal.

Jennifer Hofmann, veteran corporate training consultant and a leading expert on virtual learning for over 20 years, says employers pay a high price for subpar training sessions. In fact, the hidden costs for subpar training far exceed the $160 billion employers spend. She founded InSync Training in 1999 to banish boring webinars and help businesses extract significant value from their e-learning platforms and build core competencies for their virtual-learning training teams.

InSync is currently managing Cisco Systems’ 13-week new-hire sales training program—the Cisco Sales Associate Program (CSAP)—using Cisco’s own TelePresence and WebEx virtual learning tools. For InSync’s broad support of Cisco’s training needs since 2000, the firm was awarded an Excellence in Practice award by ASTD, the world’s largest organization of training and development professionals.

“How much do you lose?” is the first question Hofmann asks. “People will absorb the content of a PowerPoint presentation if you have a good presenter. But an hour doesn’t cut it.”

“Is your presentation ready to go before you deliver it?” she asks. “If you lose your audience’s interest and attention, they don’t absorb process and retain what they hear. Companies see little return on their investment. We set out to change all that.”

Best-Practices Pioneer in a Booming Industry

For the past 15 years, Hofmann and her team have been the standard bearers of the online classroom experience. Today, with new competitors continuing to enter the marketplace, InSync maintains its thought leadership position and enjoys $10 million in annual revenues. In 2013, the firm ranked #741 among the Inc. 500 and was the #10 fastest-growing education company in the U.S.

“Our business surged in 2008, when companies hit by the recession needed to take advantage of their existing virtual learning technologies,” Hofmann says. “We introduced them to the best practices we’d developed for the virtual classroom, which proved just as engaging and effective as traditional classroom training. Companies that work with us recognize the value of live online-training programs immediately.”

Design, Support and Delivery Worldwide

InSync’s instructional designers and professional facilitators—leveraging deep expertise in virtual-learning technologies, cognitive psychology, sales and leadership training, and other key specialties—support clients’ corporate training needs in a variety of ways.

Traditional “train the trainer”—InSync helps virtual-classroom facilitators work with students in a whole new way to ensure every training session meets workforce and organizational needs.

Instructional design—InSync has the expertise, reach and resources to provide seamless, end-to-end course creation as well as consulting and assessment in the field.

Facilitators and producers are at the ready—InSync’s program facilitators and producers, who deliver both tech support and instructional excellence, help manage and deliver virtual-training sessions that are exciting, impactful and memorable.

“We’re a global organization,” Hofmann says. “We start on Sunday evening, supporting training in China, and we don’t stop until training ends in California on Friday afternoon. We are there wherever and whenever client training takes place.”