

# 'Let's blow their socks off!': a look at blended learning

We spoke to four of our experts here at Virtual College who have been immersing themselves in the world of blended learning. A relatively new concept, they were keen to share their insights with other L&D professionals in order to try and increase their understanding and encourage them to consider using this approach in their own training programmes. These insights included how blended learning has developed, where it's heading and how it can best be used.

## The past, present and future

Though it feels like 'blended learning' has become a buzz phrase this last year, as a concept it has been around for a while – around twenty years, in fact.

Traditionally, blended learning approaches had a clear split between learner-directed learning (such as digital content or workbooks) and tutor-led or facilitated learning. But last year, the pandemic hit and blew everything out the water. It brought about changes to our professional lives that L&D teams had no choice but to consider. Take hybrid working as an example. Its growth in popularity has changed the way we view what we can do virtually or face-to-face – it's become topsy turvy. but having said that, and now that time has passed, limitations have come to light. Yes, it's great that we can use Microsoft Teams to create a virtual classroom, but it's not the same experience and doesn't require the same skills and tools as face-to-face. We've also realised that we can't always rely on self-directed learning, that it's a struggle to get everyone together, and that we might have tight budgets to consider. And traditional learning methods can't solve these problems.

### So, what does this mean for blended learning?

**It means we have to take a new approach.**

As Sarah Baker, Chief Learning Officer explained, "It isn't about purchasing assets anymore. We're now looking at how to use the skill of educational technologies in a much more sophisticated way to blend whole programmes, whether in a series of lessons or resources, and to use technology and other methods seamlessly. It's a different skill and requirement, and L&D teams should be demanding that of their educational technology suppliers."

Jez Anderson, L&D Consultant agreed. **'We need to change how people view blended learning. The phrase has certain connotations now, so we need to broaden their views and challenge them. We need to show them what a true blend can do.'**



**Jez Anderson**  
L&D Consultant



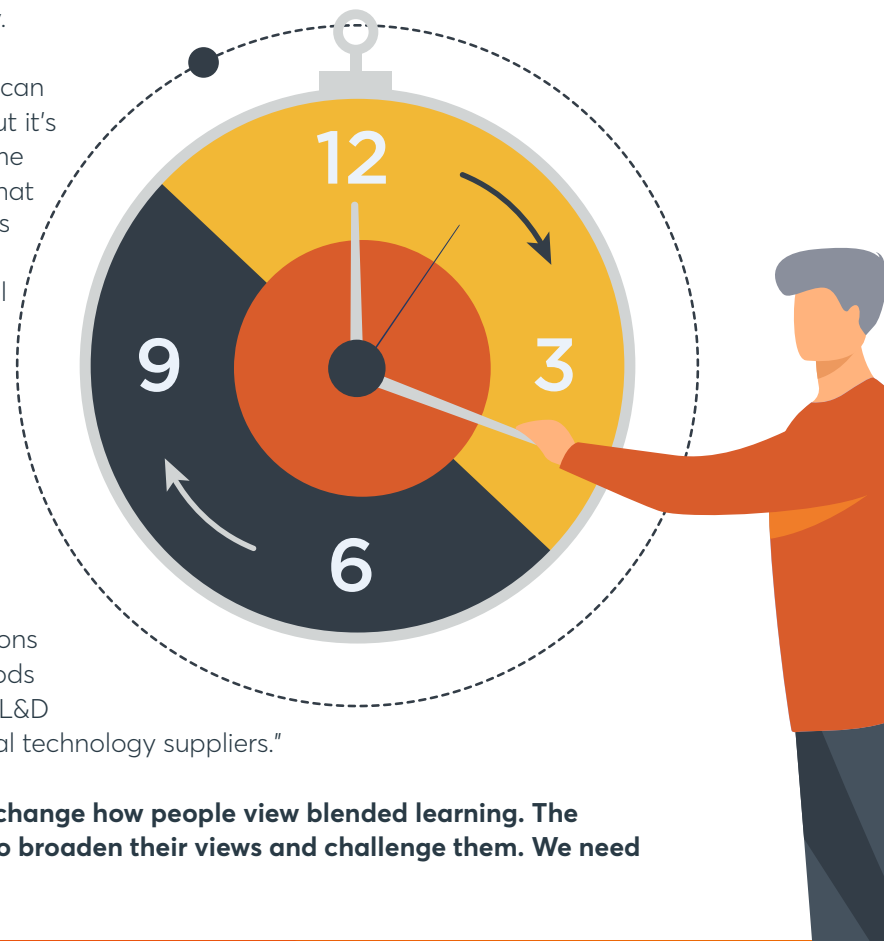
**Jamie Ashforth**  
Head of Sales



**Sarah Baker**  
Chief Learning  
Officer



**Jade Pullan**  
Learning Technology  
Consultant



## What does this mean for the L&D professional?

Jamie Ashforth, Head of Sales, believes it's all about a change in perception. "Going forward, we definitely need to change our perception of training and how we think about it and approach it."

There is a unanimous agreement that we need to shift our focus onto the learner. Jez explains, "Historically, we have had a learning approach that has been led by the tutor, teacher or organisation, and they have decided what learning the learner needed. But we're now shifting toward a different approach – a heutagogy – where the learner leads the way. So, going forward, the training needs to reflect the learners' needs, which means they need to be considered first and foremost."

Jez believes that blended learning is now about creating a learner experience, and technology is the enabler, or the "lens we look through when considering the learning".

The use of technology has been on L&D professionals' minds. Jamie, alongside colleague Jade Pullan, Learning Technology Consultant, who are both part of the Sales team here at Virtual College, recently attended Learning Live. "We had numerous conversations about technology and how it can underpin training, and everyone admits that its role has changed. It can now be used to encourage and empower", Jamie explained.

Jez agrees, explaining how this has affected the L&D role. "It's no longer about managing learning, but enabling learners to find what they need, when they need it. L&Ds need to consider when the learners want to learn, why they want to learn, how they want to learn and where they want to learn and the content needs to reflect this."

But to get this right, it's all about the learning design, which Jez thinks is of the utmost importance. "No matter how blended it is, or how much money you've spent, if it isn't designed well, if it doesn't meet the needs of the learner or organisation and it doesn't inspire and engage, then it won't work as a piece of training. It still needs good learning design. We need to ask ourselves these questions: what are we trying to achieve? What are the learners' needs? What's the best way to meet them?"

There is also a consultative role that is gaining momentum, which Sarah and Jade are both excited about. "There needs to be more focus at the start of the project, which we're calling 'the discovery phase', Sarah explained. 'It's about taking the time to understand the learners, the organisation and the context of training and discover what actions are needed – it's only then that you can design and map technology around it.'"

Jade expanded. "The discovery phase informs the whole project and process of developing it. You have to understand where the customer and their learners are on their technology journey before you can decide what they need. You often need to start right at the beginning before you can consider the all-singing and all-dancing solutions. What can they work with? Are there any barriers, such as firewalls, that could stop them? What are the learners comfortable with? What devices do they already use? What's available? It's only once you've delved into this that you can start to see what training solution will really work for them."

But there is a skill to this, and Sarah predicts that there'll be more investment in these phases and consultation work. "With the advances in technology and the ease of access to content on the internet, learning is becoming democratised. As a result, what becomes rare and more valuable are the skills required to fully understand the human elements which are needed to design the best blend, and understand the technology needed to create that winning solution. It's a combination of an art and a science, about knowing how to take the best of digital and the best of face-to-face and create something powerful – that's the skill L&D professionals need right now."



Thanks to advances in technology, we can sum up blended learning in one word – flexibility. Though it is often best used for something long-term, such as programme-based learning or a curriculum, blended approaches can scale up or down and be adapted to different budgets; they can either be digitally or face-to-face led. Here are a couple of approaches that can enhance a blended solution.

## Curation

"There has been a lot of talk about curation, and drawing on how we learn outside of work," Jamie shared. "This means that L&D teams don't necessarily need to create the content themselves, nor does it have to be perfect. It could change things a lot."

And thanks to the internet, there is a lot of content out there, and there will be learners who use it to find what they need and share it with others. But to ensure consistency across the company, it is a good idea to curate the content yourself.

### **But, again, it's a skill. To get the quality you need, consider:**

- The aims and outcomes.
- What type of content will best meet these aims.
- Where the content will be housed.
- How the learner will access it, and how it'll pull together so it works.

Overall, if the learners know your content is contextualised, that it's correct, easy to access and engaging, then they'll turn to your content first instead of going to the internet and sourcing it themselves.

## Social learning

Social (also known as informal) learning is a great example of the learner driving the learning and, as learners can share content they've found useful, it is closely connected to curation. As a result, it can be a fantastic and effective method of peer-to-peer support.

Jez believes that the key to the success of social learning is allowing it to grow organically and making sure the problems that learners are trying to solve are kept at the centre. "In the early years of social learning, communities would grow out of an interest in a shared problem," he explains. "Someone would ask for help, and others interested in the problem or with a solution would answer, and over time a community developed. What makes social learning interesting is the fact that it isn't controlled, structured or managed, and as a result it can often collapse when control is imposed on it. It is not a case of **'if we build it, they'll contribute'**."

But there are a number of barriers worth keeping in mind when trying to bring in social learning. Do they have the motivation? Can they be bothered to put the effort in? Do they worry about being exposed? Do they trust the company? Essentially, it's important to create a learning culture that allows the learners to feel comfortable and safe.



## Four stages to designing a learning programme

When it comes to designing a learning solution, there is no 'one size fits all' answer, as each training solution will depend on your outcomes and aims. But to give you a good starting point, Jez recommends keeping these four stages in mind.

- 1. Engage:** Take the time to consider what will engage the learners and how that can be achieved.
- 2. Content and knowledge:** Create or curate the content which will provide the knowledge they need.
- 3. Contextualisation:** Contextualise the learning to help the learners embed the knowledge. It's an important stage that is often missed, but a good blend will allow this to happen. Ask yourself, what is best to help learners take what they've learnt and embed it in the real world? How do you create experiences that will allow them to practise, experiment, fail and get feedback? It can include: coaching, mentoring, feedback, space to reflect on the learning and assess whether they need to go over anything again, or spaced rehearsal, where they are provided with new pieces of content over a period of time.
- 4. Measurement:** Assess whether the training works. Try and find out if the learners have changed their behaviour, taken on board the knowledge and are putting it into practice.

But despite all our excitement and enthusiasm for blended learning, it's worth keeping in mind that this isn't the answer to everything. Don't overcomplicate the training or use it for the sake of it; where the answer is a short piece of learning, PDF or video, try not to be tempted to create a fancy blended solution or a whole array of courses.

Remember, if you consider the learner, their needs and the outcomes of the training, you can't go far wrong in discovering the best approach. You'll figure out if blended is the right choice, or if you need to go in a different direction. At the end of the day, it just comes down to good learning design. Master that and you'll be well on your way to some training that really makes a difference.



## Blended learning in action

How Virtual College have provided blended learning solutions.

### Digital blends

We recently created a purely digital blended training programme for sustainability charity WRAP (see our report, [‘the importance of investing in your learners’](#) for our case study). They wanted to help the hospitality industry reduce food waste and form new habits around measuring and capturing food waste data. We designed a programme that included a range of different resources, from podcasts and case studies to e-learning – whichever was best for the learning outcome – and was supported by surgery sessions, which were held over Microsoft Teams. This helped bridge that gap between the digital and the face-to-face, allowing learners to still have opportunities to discuss, support each other and meet experts in the industry. And, as it turned out, it was the perfect solution for a pandemic!



### Face-to-face blends

Another project we designed was for a large train-operating company who was looking for a customer service training solution that would ‘blow their socks off’. We designed a full end-to-end blended approach that was completely seamless, and a great example of technology supporting and enhancing the learner experience. There were nine modules, delivered face-to-face over the course of two days, with a variety of technology in place to support. Whether that was videos to bring concepts to life, a digital learning game that was played in person, or a digital self-assessment to evaluate where learners were, each one was carefully chosen to help meet the learning aim.

The training had to be empathetic and drive real, beneficial change, which is where the technology really came into its own. Take a 360 video we created, which was a realistic train carriage with various types of customers in it – the type of setting the learners would be more than familiar with. The learners had to explore the carriage and discuss initial perceptions of the customers with each other before it was revealed who the customers actually were, uncovering qualities that may not be apparent, such as hidden disabilities. Drawing from real-life stories from steering groups, the video was designed to be an immersive and thought-provoking way of challenging the learners’ perceptions of customers and how that affects their treatment of them, and technology was paramount to its success. Can you imagine how different the effect would have been if it was delivered over the usual slide deck?

These next methods can be used as part of a blend as they are very much learner-focused. But, equally, they can stand alone as well.