Blended Learning: Smorgasbord or Solution System?

"Blended, Schmlended," says the cover of ASTD's August 2004 issue of Training and Development Magazine. The article inside contends that blended learning isn't new and that the correct training medium is the one that suits our customer, and should not be chosen for "seemingly sound pedagogical reasons."

This paper explores various definitions and attributes of blended learning, and proposes that the best blends are carefully designed solution systems that drive business results, not smorgasbords of training materials.

Why all the hype surrounding "blended learning?" After all, it's nothing new. Remember what fun it was to learn history in elementary school when our assignments included reading, writing essays, and dressing in period-costumes for role-plays. Without a doubt, blended learning has been used by creative educators from the dawn of time; so why has the new term, "blended learning" emerged in the early 21st century?

Perhaps it is due to the irrational exuberance that surrounded Web-based training (WBT) in the late 1990s when many predicted that WBT would eliminate the need for classroom training. WBT (or to use more common moniker, e-learning), with all its power and reach, would advance the science of instruction and reduce the expense of delivery and update. Finally, we can leverage the power of the Web beyond distribution and develop low-bandwidth interactions that incorporate video, audio, and 3-D animation. This changed everything! Or did it?

E-learning is changing everything, but it will not completely replace the training facilitator and it doesn't always provide ongoing performance support. Welcome back, blended learning.

What is Blended Learning?

There isn't a standard definition for blended learning. The simplest and perhaps the most common conception is that it is a class that combines e-learning and classroom training.

Allison Rossett defines blended learning as "… an integrated strategy for delivering on promises about learning and performance. Blending involves a planned combination of approaches, such as coaching by a supervisor; participation in an online class; breakfast with colleagues; competency descriptions; reading on the beach; reference to a manual; collegial relationships; and participation in seminars, workshops, and online communities." (Douglis, Frazee, and Rossett, 2003)

Rossett and her colleagues provide the following as the list of possible ingredients to blend.
Marc Rosenberg and Allison Rossett agree

Live face-to-face (formal) • Instructor-led classroom • Workshops • Coaching/mentoring • On-the-job (OTJ) training	**Live face-to-face (informal)** • Collegial connections • Work teams • Role modeling
Virtual collaboration/synchronous • Live e-learning classes • E-mentoring	**Virtual collaboration/asynchronous** • Email • Online bulletin boards • Listservs • Online communities

Self-paced learning	Performance support
• Web learning modules • Online resource links • Simulations • Scenarios • Video and audio CD/DVDs • Online self-assessments • Workbooks	• Help systems • Print job aids • Knowledge databases • Documentation • Performance/decision-support tools

(Douglis, Frazee, and Rossett, 2003)

that blended learning is comprised of both instructional and informational assets. But, they also warn that simply building a smorgasbord of instruction and information does not guarantee that the learners will eat, eat nutritiously, and come back for seconds.

Why use Blended Learning?

As stated earlier, creative educators have always used blended learning. The fact that people have different learning styles is a strong argument in favour of this approach, but there are also research and Level III evaluations that suggest that blended learning increases people's ability to apply new skills and knowledge while on the job.

In 2003, Thomson NETg reported results from a controlled research study that compared blended learning to e-learning. They found that blended learning increased accuracy of performance by 30 percent, and that real-world tasks were completed 41 percent faster. (Thomson NETg, 2003)

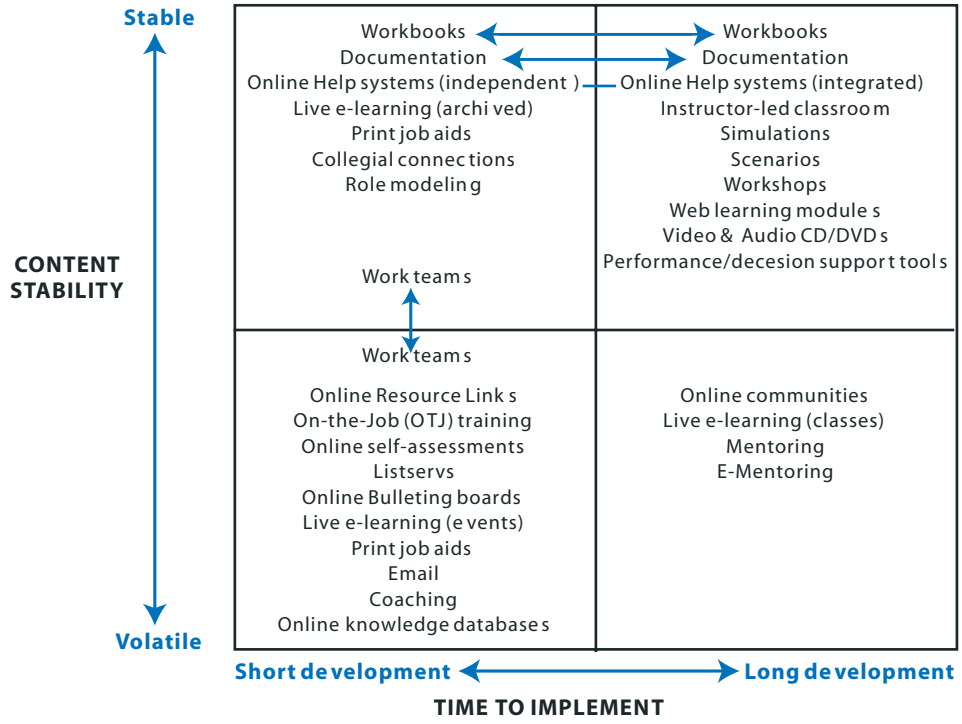
NCR Corporation of Dayton, Ohio, is increasing their use of blended learning. Herb Bivens, director of e-learning development at NCR, reports that "… the blended learning program undergoing Level III assessment has shown that 71 percent of the learners responding were much more effective discussing the particular technology solution with their customers." (Barbian 2002)

How do you Design Blended Learning?

Training professionals and performance consultants always focus on the business needs of their clients. They know that the request for training is driven by a need to increase production, improve customer service, ensure compliance, implement a new computer system, or resolve some issue that is taking a toll on the bottom line. In this context, blended learning is a solution system that combines performance interventions that are designed to drive desired results.

The complexity of the design increases when the blend is rich and the audience is diverse. Each aspect of the blend must be considered within the context of the whole system.

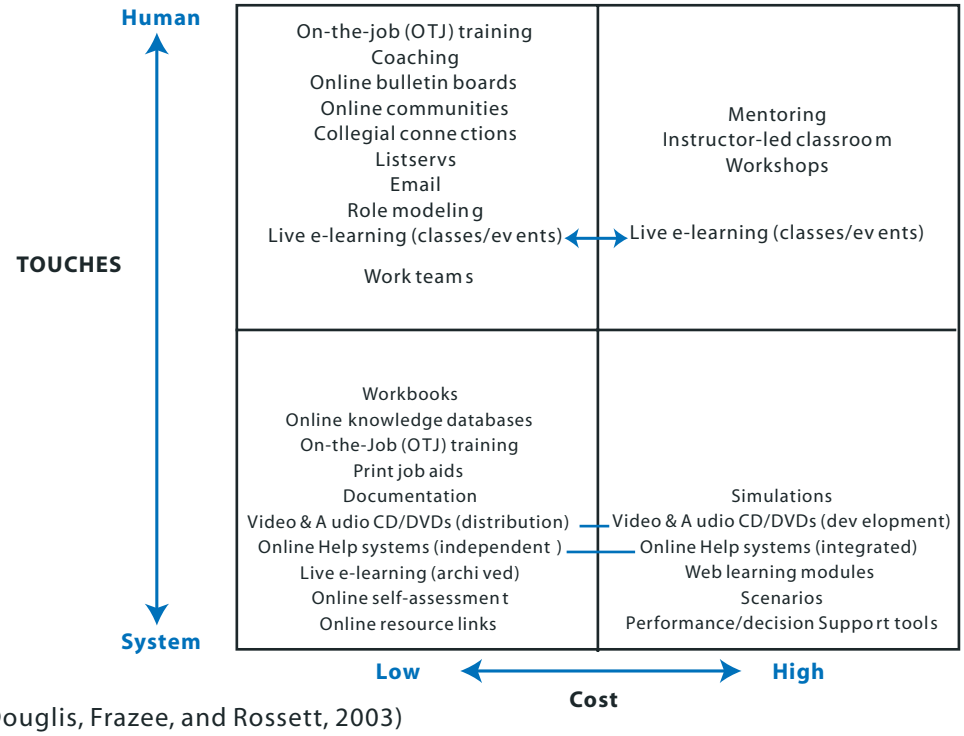
Douglis, Frazee, and Rossett created three matrices that serve as guidelines for the design of blended learning:



(Douglis, Frazee, and Rossett, 2003)

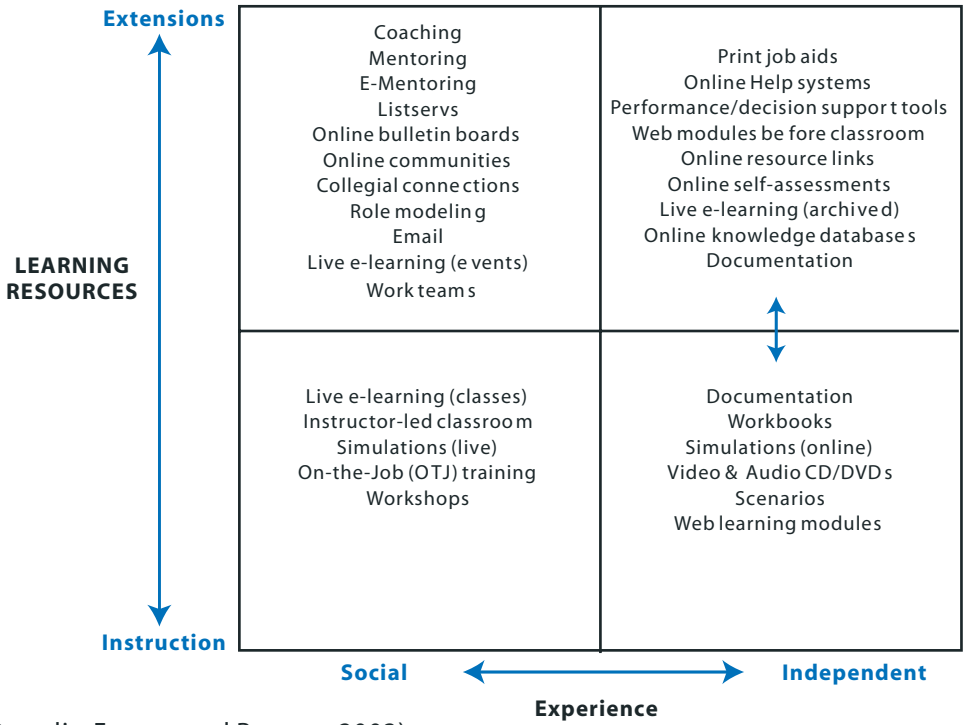
The first matrix compares the stability of the content with the time available to implement. Notice that simple Web resources are recommended when the content will change frequently and the time to implement is short. Simulations and workshops are appropriate when content is stable and development time is longer.

The same assets are grouped relative to their degree of "high-touch" and their relative cost in the second matrix. Notice that classroom training and workshops still exist and are recommended for situations where face-to-face interaction is important and budgets are sufficiently large.



(Douglis, Frazee, and Rossett, 2003)

The last matrix groups these assets according to their own qualities. Are they instructional or do they extend beyond the initial learning experience? Are they collaborative (social) or independent?



(Douglis, Frazee, and Rossett, 2003)

These matrices are useful tools to add to your professional toolbox. But, the most important thing to remember when designing blended learning is to customize it to drive business results. After all, the bottom line is, well, the bottom line.