body LANGUAGE in the band WIDTH

Jennifer Hofmann on connecting, collaborating and succeeding in the virtual classroom

InSync Training's founder Jennifer Hofmann authors Body Language in the Bandwidth, an active conversation focused on connecting, collaborating and succeeding in the modern classroom.

[Negotiating Blended Learning Gone Awry: 3 Approaches](#)

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Your [blended learning](#) course is set to go. You are certain that online and face-to-face elements are well aligned; the design engaging; and the content relevant. You're confident learners and instructors will greatly benefit from it.

So, what could possibly go wrong?

We know that any number of things can go awry. It's an expectation built into our work. Being prepared to tackle common challenges up front can make for higher quality blended learning opportunities.

There are three obstacles that I see as topping the list of blended learning challenges.

1. Design and Content Pitfalls

When the design and content portions of my training offerings are under par, things don't go as planned. In addition to grumpy participants, my desired results go unachieved. Here is what I know can put a course into the not-so-great category:

- The design is not-user friendly.
- The technology doesn't support the design.
- Some of the online tasks should be instructor-led.
- The content is not relevant; or it does not have a logical flow.
- There is too much information in the online portion that limits interaction.
- There are lots of "bells and whistles" that supersede content.
- The material is not contextualized.

"Badly designed hybrid classes bore students, waste instructors' time, and disrupt communication," explains college educator Greg Beatty, Ph.D. I concur.

Part of the problem, laments Michelle Kunz, director of leadership and learning at NetSpeed, is that content developers often insert the same content into blended learning they use in face-to-face instruction. "The activities," Kunz notes, "don't automatically transfer from one environment to the other. Even the visual design must be a little different to be optimally successful."

When I design learning materials, in whatever form, I do the following, all with an eye toward avoiding design and content flaws:

- Identify what participants need to learn. Set achievable objectives accompanied by learning pathways. (Objectives, to me, are the most important piece of development. They drive the content!)
- Closely follow the design process to determine which elements are best for digital self-paced learning and face-to-face instruction. Remember that design precedes technology selection.
- Partner with a subject matter expert (SME) and/or collaborate with peers to inform content. Work with a designer, too, if needed.
- Invite SMEs, colleagues, etc., to give the course a test run to determine what needs improvement. I always pilot first! It's enormously beneficial.

2. Tech Troubles

It's true! Limited bandwidth is a tech nightmare, messing with audio/video syncing and internet connections. I agree with Kunz, who recommends these strategies for tackling bandwidth demons:

- Course hosts, producers, facilitators, and participants should close desktop programs that slow things down; and minimize or eliminate items that require bandwidth (e.g., a teleconference bridge instead of VOIP).
- Users hardwire their systems to enhance speed.
- Eliminate or minimize items that require bandwidth.
- The host/producer troubleshoots while the instructor facilitates content.

Sarah Berce, a former public school teacher, suggests facilitators should also:

- Thoroughly explore online components to guard against potential tech hiccups (like institutional firewalls!).
- Prepare learners beforehand to tackle potential tech problems.
- Develop relationships with those who can help negotiate technical jams, like online teachers and tech support staff.

Finally: Know thy devices and tools. The success of blended learning relies on their functionality. Make sure learners can access these, and that required software is available and compatible with selected devices.

3. Instructor Struggles

Michael Shaw, Ph.D., president of SilkWeb, explains that "strong blended learning instructors make the best use of both worlds. They understand what to do and when to do it." But, when they don't understand, they either face or create problems such as the following:

- A weak link between online and face-to-face instruction.
- A lack or misuse of tools for measuring learner progress.
- Minimal grasp of how flipped learning rolls out.

Shaw offers strategies that can result in successful blended learning instruction, including:

- PowerPoint presentations, readings, videos, and book exercises are best completed online.
- Face-to-face time should focus on explaining challenging concepts and performing hands-on practical activities. Consider it as a lab in which to demonstrate, watch, direct, fill in the blanks, and use teaching techniques and stimuli that cannot be used online.
- Organize the online portion of the course in a simple format. Make the syllabus available and easy to follow; create a forum where learners can pose questions; post discussion prompts; arrange assignments and materials according to the week that they are due.
- An LMS is a must have for submitting assignments, tracking grades, and communicating details with students.
- Quizzes and exams should be online. Most LMS portals offer tools for grading and timing exams, and for sorting questions.

Yep, a blended learning event gone wrong is a tough professional bear to handle. But we can tame that bear moving forward by preparing in advance for known glitches. And being aware that these rough times, while a struggle in the moment, ultimately make for better learning and teaching over the long term.

Related Resources

Article: *7 Ways to Break Bad Blended Learning*
This piece describes seven approaches teachers take in blended learning programs to create effective learning experiences, from content creation to selecting appropriate devices.

Article: *NRA to Fix Blended Training "Mistake"*
This piece describes the NRA's controversial virtual Basic Pistol training that resulted in significant pushback from gun instructors. The article underscores that there is just some content that cannot be delivered virtually, a consideration instructors must make when designing courses.

Article: *Wrestling Virtual Learning Technology Trauma to the Mat*
This piece concisely delineates several of the potentially nightmarish tech glitches that can ruin a digital learning experience if recovery plans have not been prepared in advance.

Infographic: *4 Step Disaster Recovery Process*
InSync Training developed a process for their virtual classroom producers that helps keep webinars and other virtual learning events on track, even when the technology or learners disrupt the process. This complimentary infographic details the four steps and the reasoning behind them.