TYPES OF MICROLEARNING
We’ve been watching online videos, listening to podcasts, and playing virtual games for a while. All fun stuff. It turns out that these digital delights are more than just entertainment. They are valuable tools that make for enduring and engaging microlearning.

Microlearning—which uses short learning modules—bolsters the modern blended learning landscape to support the way people work and live. This involves controlling what, when, where, and how they learn, and using technology to support that learning. Even more significant is that microlearning raises retention rates, bypassing the forgetting curve.

Microlearning is powerful. It allows the designer to create experiences that:

- Provide brief but substantial and manageable bits of information
- Focus on a single skill or topic
- Lighten the cognitive load
- Are easy to access and do “on the run”
- Offer a multi-platform learning opportunity
- Are cost effective to develop

The variety of microlearning formats is expanding. Across all of the various types are shared characteristics that appeal to learners, designers, developers, facilitators, producers, and managers. Most important, all of these types of microlearning can be applied to teach content in the most authentic, efficient, and effective ways possible.

The ten types of microlearning described here can be easily incorporated into your blended learning solutions to serve your modern learners in their moments of learning need.
VIDEOS

Videos top microlearning formats. Learners love to watch them. They are highly accessible (think YouTube); easily produced; readily built into a training program; playable on multiple devices (especially useful for those on the go); and are time efficient (it’s easy to cut them into short segments). Learners especially appreciate the option for stopping and replaying to check for understanding or review critical concepts. These characteristics help learners to absorb, retain, and transfer information well because videos meaningfully contextualize concepts.

To effectively use videos in microlearning, keep them short (under ten minutes); provide a transcript and closed captioning, if possible; be mindful of the file size (think bandwidth); and make sure your learners can easily access the videos on all of their devices.

VIDEOS ENHANCE THE BLENDED LEARNING EXPERIENCES IN A NUMBER OF WAYS, INCLUDING:

- Their visual and auditory cues appeal to learners’ sensory-based learning preferences, heightening attention and retention.
- Learners can easily watch videos outside of the learning environment to deepen their understanding of difficult topics.
- Videos can introduce learners to a concept or skill before participating in a session where it will be explored more fully.
- Videos covering myriad topics are readily available on the internet, so in-house production might not be necessary.
- In terms of timeliness, videos can be updated to stay on top of trends.
- Videos can spark any number of learning activities, tasks, assignments, and assessments.
When designers incorporate games as microlearning treatments in blended learning solutions, learners can gain valuable performance-improving feedback. Games motivate action, promote learning, and heighten recall. They invite learners to experience “productive failure” as they continue to tackle unfamiliar challenges to solve a problem.

Games are most effective when they: are realistic and representative of the environment in which the learner is situated; involve learners in leveled tasks that have consequences (which invites self-correction); provide “rewards,” from badges or tokens, to achievable points; do not distract from the overall training; and encourage users to apply what they have learned.

GAMES AS MICROLEARNING TOOLS HAVE OBVIOUS BLENDED LEARNING ADVANTAGES. FOR EXAMPLE:

- Because they are fun and exciting, games motivate learning and can help learners develop or hone several skills at once.
- Games can offer many different types of interactive content, from simulations, to adventures, to role-play, to puzzles.
- Performance assessments—formative or summative—are easily incorporated into a game, with options to link and record results within associated learning management systems.
- Games can deepen conceptual learning and critical thinking.
There are millions of blogs. And millions of people read them. They are a popular form of expression on every topic imaginable. In a microlearning context, blogs are more than just reading material. They are flexible, practical, and easily accessible learning tools. Blogs can reinforce content, encourage reflection, and strengthen understanding where video and audio cannot.

The characteristics of blogs are highly appealing to learners and instructors when they are: brief, yet content rich; regularly updated for timely content; linkable to from other sites, especially via social media, where users can informally discuss their thoughts about explored topics (social networking groups do this a lot!); and target audiences drawn to their authentic and conversational format.

BLOGS HAVE MULTIPLE USES IN THE MODERN BLENDED LEARNING CONTEXT, INCLUDING:

- They open discussion among digital communities.
- Instructors create blogs to keep learners informed about assignments, resources, workplace topics, etc., that are relevant to the learning experience.
- SMEs use blogs to showcase theories and work beneficial to learners.
- Blogs summarize course content throughout the blend, either before it is introduced or after a lesson, to emphasize important concepts and practices.
- Learners not only read and comment on experts’ blog entries, but can also create blogs on topics they are studying to share with peers participating in the same learning event.
- Blogs can serve as a repository of learners’ work, which instructors access virtually to formatively assess during the course of a blended learning campaign.
These visuals are efficient tools for sharing information: from data, to stories, to steps in a process. They have the power to improve comprehension with graphics that enhance a learner’s ability to readily recognize patterns and trends. Pictures, combined with pared down language, support learning retention, transfer, and reinforcement.

Quality infographics: are clear, concise (one page at most), and compelling; present content in ways that is not confusing or distracting; have graphics that faithfully support the content in a logical fashion; and are thoughtfully designed.
Podcasts are versatile, motivating audio tools that grab learners’ attention...and maintain it. They strengthen learners’ conceptual understanding and retention of content. Podcasts are plentiful on the web, not too taxing to produce, and easily shared as MP3 files through a variety of reliable web- and cloud-based services.

As with other microlearning tools, podcasts should fit in with overall learning content (e.g., if concepts require visuals for comprehension, a podcast is not the tool to use). Podcast quality is critical: elements like sound and speakers’ voices are essential to a positive learning experience. Whether selecting already produced podcasts or developing them in house, be mindful of flow, organization of content, language, and duration. Note that the length and frequency of podcasts are typically related. Daily podcasts are typically shorter (less than 20 minutes), and weekly podcasts typically run longer (30-60 minutes).

PODCASTS PRESENT A NUMBER OF POSITIVES IN THE BLENDED LEARNING ENVIRONMENT:

- They serve as practical refresher tools that learners can review as often as desired to cement understanding.
- Podcasts feature experts, industry representatives, organizational leadership, and other specialists who can speak to course topics.
- They are 100% portable—easily loadable into iPods, mobile phones, and other devices that people use to learn on the run.
Email is an exceptional communication tool with the capacity for expanding the blended learning experience. It is an ideal medium for course-related interaction among learners and instructors, from the posting of announcements to the sharing of feedback.

If you plan to use email as a microlearning tool, use program features that will help you determine whether learners are receiving and actually reading the emails. For example, “intelligence” or analytics tools give insight to open rates, click-through rates, etc., reflective of learner interaction. Establish participation agreements that call for responses to messages or completed assignments within a set timeframe. A strategically designed email learning campaign is one of the best ways to capture and sustain learner engagement. Each email is part of a progression of required tasks and calls to action.

EMAIL-BASED LEARNING PROGRAMS OFFER LEARNERS AND INSTRUCTORS SEVERAL BENEFICIAL FEATURES:

- Courses (even self-paced) can be sent as email messages (simple lessons) or as attachments (more in-depth lessons).
- Email can be linked to automatic messaging—or autoresponders—that are pre-programmed to send out content in micro formats.
- Instructors can monitor learner engagement and progress, and offer feedback in real time.
- A variety of tasks can be undertaken via e-mail, such as sending progress reports and course updates.
Microlearning and social media are perfectly paired because their users look for the same thing in both: readily available snippets of information that require little time to review and absorb. It’s clear how sites like Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, and LinkedIn are ideal spaces for condensed learning content.

Effectively incorporating social media into online learning demands attention to its quality, relevance to course content (specifically learning objectives), accessibility, learner social media preferences, and the shareability potential for selected resources.

SOCIAL COMPONENTS HEIGHTEN ENGAGEMENT IN BLENDED LEARNING THROUGH ACTIVITIES THAT INCLUDE:

- Daily tips or mini challenges via text messages can keep learners engaged in content between learning sessions.
- Online learning communities can engage learners in guided, content-relevant discussions.
- Social media presents opportunities for learners to interact in real time with experts, industry leaders, and even leadership of organizations where they work.
- Instructors can share materials on Pinterest and Instagram, post thought-provoking assignments on Twitter, and even host an entire course on a selected social media platform.
Job aids do as they are named: they help learners perform certain tasks effectively. They come in varied formats, such as checklists, diagrams, summaries, forms, decision tables, and flowcharts. No matter the format, a job aid is designed to walk learners through the procedures required to successfully complete a specific set of actions.

The most practical job aids are generally one-page documents with pertinent images (that, for example, represent a step in a process), simple language, and action steps. They highlight important details or information, and ultimately, of course, help the learner effectively perform a task.

There several ways job aids can bolster blended learning:

- They can be matched to segments of a longer training to strengthen understanding.
- Learners might use a job aid to provide context for a video they watch.
- They support learners at various stages of learning and performance, from doing something for the first time, to remembering or adapting a step or process.
- Job aids are especially useful (and maybe all that is needed) when a quick change occurs that requires some task readjustment.
Scenarios are one of the most effective ways to ensure that learning sticks. They place learners in simulated but realistic situations that help them, for example, recognize and resolve conflicts, or identify and work through processes. They also invite learners to immediately apply skills acquired during a broader training. Basically, learners apply, and reinforce, what they have learned.

Quality learning scenarios are rich in detail (but not overwhelming), entertaining and emotionally centered, have real-world connections, draw on prior knowledge, and are not overly complex. They have a specific objective, align appropriately with course content, and are interactive.

IN BLENDED LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS, SCENARIOS BENEFIT PARTICIPANTS IN A VARIETY OF WAYS:

- They are captivating stories that mimic real life and have believable characters, incidents, and challenges. Learners connect to their realism, allowing learners to easily absorb content.
- Scenarios promote critical thinking, problem solving, and the opportunity to “fail” but try again to self-correct and reach desired outcomes.
- Learners using scenarios have the opportunity to negotiate difficult, sensitive, controversial, or risky topics, (e.g., sexual harassment or workplace violence).
Interactives are ... well, VERY interactive learning elements. That’s what makes them so appealing to learners. While somewhat similar to scenarios conceptually, they offer greater opportunities for interaction that require higher level problem-solving and critical-thinking skills. And they give learners more options for managing content on their terms.

For interactives to be effective and relevant, keep the following in mind: know your audience and design accordingly; smartly integrate web-based pathways that supplement content and especially encourage skills and knowledge application; develop fun activities that are meaningful and link to course outcomes; make sure all “moving parts” are easily navigable; find out what devices learners use so they can actually delve into the learning experience hassle-free; and design them so that the average completion time is under ten minutes.

INTERACTIVES IN BLENDING LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS TEND TO BETTER ENGAGE LEARNERS WITH AN ARRAY OF COMPELLING TASKS SUCH AS:

- Branching scenarios require them to choose an action in order to make decisions or address a challenge. Each selection presents consequences, additional choices, new circumstances to navigate, and so on.
- Interactive videos invite learners to actively engage with on-screen elements.
- “Hands-on” elements that have learners “do things” really guide understanding. For example: “click, drag, and hover” tasks that reveal information; activities that allow students to build things (like atoms!); and fillable components, like forms and assessments.

There are a number of authoring tools, even of the open-source ilk, with toolkits for creating these and many more types of exciting interactives.
REFERENCES


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