

Chapter 31

Blended Learning for Learners in SMEs

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ABSTRACT

While blended learning seems to be quite suitable for Small and Medium Sized Enterprises (SMEs), take-up of this learning method is not implemented at the level it could be. This chapter investigates aspects that encourage learners in European SMEs to choose blended learning for professional development. The results indicate how the take-up of blended learning by SME learners can be improved. Research has explored the field further and blended learning has become a more mainstream form of learning. A revisit of case studies with stakeholders of Blended Learning in SMEs looks at changes indicated by research and explores Blended Learning in progress. A comparison between European and African SMEs looks at differences and commonalities that might affect blended learning. The final section outlines a vision of how blended learning is feasible under challenging conditions, including inadequate funding, limited computer or Internet access, poor infrastructure, diversity of learner groups, and differences in learning culture.

INTRODUCTION

Small to Medium-Sized Enterprises (SMEs) are often innovative, but are also under great economic pressure, which is a threat to ongoing learning activities even though continuous training and learning is necessary to stay competitive. E-learning is not in high demand with SMEs although one would expect that it is extremely suitable to a learning demand at short notice (Wood & Watson, 2002), which is typical for SME learning.

Blended learning, a mix of online and face-to-face (F2F) learning, can combine the positive aspects of both, classroom-based learning and e-learning environments (Bonk & Graham, 2006). Blended learning can then provide an alternative to e-learning and might have the potential to better meet SME learners' needs. A mix of learning styles and different dimensions of learning at course level can further increase the usage of blended learning opportunities as a suitable way for training in SMEs and thereby increase or keep up the competitiveness of these companies.

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The main goal of this chapter is to provide an overview of blended learning, followed by an outline of a vision of how blended learning is feasible under challenging conditions, including inadequate funding, limited computer or Internet access, poor infrastructure, diversity of learner groups, and differences in learning culture.

BLENDED LEARNING

Blended learning describes a learning environment that either combines teaching methods, delivery methods, media formats, or a mixture of them all. The term blended learning is very complex and ambiguous; therefore, the next paragraphs aim to give a comprehensive overview of the different definitions, dimensions, and success factors for blended learning. The following text provides more detail on blended learning topics.

Definitions of Blended Learning

In the literature, the term blended learning is used to describe for example the integrated combination of traditional off-line methods of learning with intranet, extranet Web-based or Internet-based online approaches (Garavan & O'Donnell, 2003). To accentuate the fact that the concept is learner-centered, blended learning can be described as a combination of delivery methods that have been selected and fashioned to accommodate the various learning needs of a diverse audience in a variety of subjects (Mc Sporrán & King, 2005). Blended learning combines classroom-based learning with computer-mediated instruction (Graham, 2006; The eLearning Guild, 2006), but it also mixes various event-based activities, including F2F classrooms, live e-learning, and self-paced learning (Valiathan, 2002). More recently the concept of time-based blended learning has been introduced (Norberg, Dziuban & Moskal, 2011). Here the focus is on a mix of synchronous and asynchronous activities. Synchronous activities can be online or in the classroom

The differentiation in skill-driven, attitude-driven, and competency-driven learning as different forms of blended learning looks at the focus of the learning. Skill-driven learning combines Self-paced learning and support mechanisms to develop certain knowledge and skills. Attitude-driven learning aims at developing specific behaviour by mixing different event types and delivery media. Competency-driven learning targets workplace related competencies and provides performance support tools, knowledge management resources, and mentoring (Valiathan, 2002).

The availability of pedagogical expertise, as well as learning delivered through videoconferencing and video streaming in combination with F2F collaboration, is a blend described by the Advanced Broadband Enabled Learning (ABEL) program in Canada (Murphy, 2007). Oliver and Trigwell (2005) dismiss definitions that consider a combination of e-learning with traditional learning, the combination of online learning with F2F learning, the combination of different media, the combination of contents, the combination of theories and learning, the combination of learning objectives, and finally combined pedagogies. They came to the conclusion that blended learning misses the learner's perspective and recommend the variation theory of Bowden and Marton (1998) for the development of blended learning courses to improve learning.

Another approach uses the mix of learning theories towards blended learning, combines cognitivism, constructivism, and performance support which transforms it into a very practical approach defining live events, self-paced learning, collaboration, assessment, and performance support materials as the key ingredients of blended learning (Carman, 2005).

Probably the most succinct definition of blended learning is provided by Reynolds and Greiner, who describe blended learning simply as the "use of more than one instructional methodology" (p. 216). A combination of storytelling, song, recitation, reading aloud, flash cards, puppetry,

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