

The eLearning Coach Podcast #25
[ELC 025: Insights for Designing Blended Learning](#)
With Jennifer Hofmann

Hello learning people, and welcome to episode 25 of The eLearning Coach Podcast. Our field is going through so many transitions because we now have a multitude of technologies and techniques for building learning experiences. That's why I thought it would be a good idea to speak with Jennifer Hofmann about blended learning. Jennifer is the CEO of InSync Training which specializes in the delivery of virtual and blended learning. She is also the author of several books that focus on virtual training, including *How to Design for the Live Online Classroom*, *Live and Online*, and *The Synchronous Trainer's Survival Guide*. Today we discuss the evolution of blended learning, what makes a learning experience authentic, a four-step process for creating blended learning, and much more. Here is the interview.

Connie: Hi, Jennifer, welcome to the eLearning Coach Podcast.

Jennifer: Hi, Connie, thank you.

Connie: Today we're talking about blended learning, which is a pretty hot topic I would say. So, just for a clear definition of it, can you talk a little bit about how blended learning used to be defined and how its meaning has changed?

Jennifer: Sure. It really has changed and I think it's going to continue to change. Used to be when people thought about blended learning they always thought that first of all there was a face-to-face component, a live face-to-face component, and then maybe some eLearning on the backend, or what we might call homework. And the problem with that model of blended learning is that we have taught our audience that homework and pre-work is optional, that if it's really important they will tell me when I get to the live class. So that wasn't always as successful as it could be.

Another view of blended learning was trying to make content 'all things for all people'. In other words, trying to appeal to visual learners by producing in video and having a lot of lecture for audio-based learners. Now we understand that, first of all, learning styles don't necessarily improve learning experiences, appealing to learning styles don't necessarily improve learning. And that is a very expensive way to create content, developing it every way possible for every type of learner, the way I want to consume it.

So blended learning has evolved, and if we look at it from a design perspective it's not about technology, it's not about whether you're using the classroom or eLearning, the

virtual classroom or social learning, it's how content is conveyed to the learner in the best way possible. Formally we can say blended learning is an instructional treatment that takes into account matching content to the most appropriate technology and doing that at the learning objective level, and then sequencing them in a way that makes sense to create a complete program of instruction.

Connie: Yeah, that is exactly what it is now.

Jennifer: I do think that blended learning is probably going to go away soon as a concept as learners start to expect that we have multiple modalities in a program of instruction, multiple technologies, multiple treatments, calling it blended learning isn't going to make sense. I don't know what we're going to call it, but blended learning might become an old word very soon.

Connie: I really think so. I think right now we needed to explain the convergence of all of these different approaches and modalities, but over time I think it will just be learning and people will be completely used to it and won't think about what channel they're on.

Jennifer: And thank you, right?

Connie: Right. That will be awesome. I think things are changing at a rapid pace and I am loving it. But let me ask you something, in all of your experience with blended learning, designing it, using it and reading about it, what are some of the more unusual modalities that you've seen that can be part of a blended learning program?

Jennifer: Connie, nothing's really unusual anymore, everything's fair game. Technologies can include things like social learning, video, virtual classrooms, traditional classrooms, and those technologies can be used in combination with very modern techniques, like gamification, which can use eLearning, which can use social, which can happen face-to-face. Simulations, any of the social collaborative learning or techniques that use different technologies. So all of these different things are converging on us at the same time, nothing's really unusual anymore, but we are seeing a lot of creative applications. For example, virtual classroom technologies like WebEx or Adobe Connect being used in a traditional classroom to implement games or allow for collaboration between small groups, that you used to not be able to get face-to-face, but the technology helps to enable it. So things are starting to combine.

Connie: You're really right about that. At this point there is nothing unusual. The only thing is sometimes there are novel experiences that people haven't had before. And the

cool thing about it all is that now we're focused on building experiences, and that can include basically everything.

Jennifer: That's really true. And there is a lot of debates going on right now, should we call it training, should we call them learners as opposed to workers, as opposed to something else. I'm worried that we're going to get too caught up in that because definitions can get confusing. I've got one client, it's the one project that's trying to get away from the word 'learners' because they say it's not a modern word, but this is just going out of one department, the rest of the organization isn't going to change. So I'm worried about people trying to get trendy and trying to ahead of the game but confusing the rest of the organization as well.

Connie: So, Jennifer, why do you think blended learning is a growing design trend?

Jennifer: Think back to the traditional classroom, those approaches aren't very flexible, and they tend to be very expensive. We wait till we can fill one entire class and we teach it and we hope that the classroom delivery coincides with when the learners need that information. And what blended learning experiences allow us to do when we incorporate live and on-demand types of technologies, it makes it first of all more cost-effective to train small groups. We can be in a group with just five people or maybe even just one person, we don't need to wait for thirty people to be ready, we can offer them a lot more frequently and we don't need the cost of classrooms and travel, and that time away from work and home that is so hard to calculate.

Now, the modern workplace environment, as you mentioned before, is really about creating experiences that I think need to be authentic and we need to make sure we deliver content, information, training, whatever we want to call it, to learners at the right place, and places are traditional classrooms, desktop computers, mobile devices or on the job. We want to make sure it's at the right time, and that could be a formally scheduled blended learning program or something on-demand like Microlearning which is so hot and trendy now. So once the technology investment has been made, it makes a lot of economic sense. And, as organizations become more global, we can get to people and get them to collaborate in learning. I think that also makes sense because this is the way we really work now. We work in a dispersed global workforce on virtual teams, and if we teach people using these technologies we're not just teaching them the ultimate content, we're also teaching them how to work in the modern environment.

Connie: That's a really good point, it's very meta, right?

Jennifer: Yes.

Connie: So, Jennifer, you just listed several advantages to blended learning. What do you see as the disadvantages to using a blended approach, have you seen any disadvantages?

Jennifer: Sure. Like you said, there are disadvantages. First of all, it's not easy. When you start to combine different technologies, and by technologies I mean virtual classrooms, eLearning, video, sending them out to different places like classrooms, desktop computers, mobile devices, and we start to use very advanced design techniques, like social collaborative learning and gamification, it's a lot of stuff and we need a lot of expertise to implement that. It's also really difficult to track, and in this world where we want to make sure that everybody finish the eLearning and everybody earns their certificate, how do you track if somebody reads an infographic? And, more than that, how do you track if that infographic actually met its goal in delivering the information it was designed to deliver? It's hard to measure the usefulness and it's also hard for us as training organizations not to focus on the live stuff. 'If it's really important, she'll tell me when I get to the live event.' And I think that students and teachers, or I think that learners and facilitators, always focus on the live event, whether it be face-to-face, video conferencing, virtual classroom, as being the most important, and everything else is optional.

What we need to do when designing blended learning is make sure that everything that we include in a blend is obviously relevant to our adult learners. And I am also trying to start a campaign, and Connie maybe you will help me change language. So we don't go to events and then do eLearning, we participate in a lesson. So it doesn't matter if that's a live lesson on virtual classroom, it doesn't matter if that's face-to-face, it doesn't matter if it's self-directed and eLearning, it's a lesson. Or maybe we have an activity, a scavenger hunt, a breakout room, or we have an assessment of some kind. And there is some overlap between activities and assessments and lessons, but stop focusing on modules and sessions and use language that makes each piece of content apparently equivalent and important.

Connie: I love that. Another thing that comes to mind as far as disadvantage, when you're saying that it's tough and it's tough to measure, it's really tough to design too, because it can be a mishmash of different approaches. I think the designer has to be able to step back and see the big pictures and see if everything fits together like a puzzle.

Jennifer: That's exactly right. There are a lot of pieces, and the more complex your blend the harder it is to manage. The instructional designer almost becomes a project

manager, and they need to be willing to bring in different pieces of expertise. But put them together as if they're choreographing a dance, everything needs to fit. But we also need to adapt to the flexibility that people expect with these modern technologies. I've got a concern with the latest trend towards mobile. Mobile there's a lot of things, very well. But mobile is a place, because you can have eLearning on mobile, you can infographics on mobile, you can Google things, we could even participate in Skype calls or WebEx sessions on mobile devices. But when people say mobile, they think it's a thing, I think of it as a place.

I just had a conversation with a client yesterday that said everything should be mobile enabled in this environment. While I agree that everything can be mobile enabled, I don't think that it always creates an authentic learning environment. If you think about trying to teach someone how to use Excel Pivot Tables, where are they going to use that ultimate skill? They're going to be using it at their desktop. So I would submit the best place to learn is at their desktop, not in a classroom because that's not an authentic environment, not on a mobile device because they're never going to create a Pivot Table on a phone. A learner might choose to do that but they need to understand the limitations that they might be moving from an opportunity where they have a chance to do hands-on practice and approach mastery, but if they just opt to use a cellphone or a smartphone then it's much more of a knowledge experience, which is okay if that's all they need, but it's not an authentic training experience because that's not where they're going to be using the skill.

Connie: Right. Mobile is excellent for support and for videos, but it's not for everything, it's not eLearning on a phone. And then just to complicate matters we've got the phablet, something that's in between a phone and a tablet and as each technology comes out our lives get more interesting and more complicated.

Jennifer: But five years ago a laptop was a mobile device.

Connie: Right. That's amazing.

Jennifer: So as blended learning goes away, maybe devices won't mean as much, I'm not certain. I teach a fun workshop about live, mobile, virtual classrooms, and students log in on their desktop but they also log in on as many mobile devices as they want, their iPad or smartphone. They participate in the same activity on two or three different devices, and they start to get a light bulb over their head, an 'aha' moment that says, oh I see why this is so much more powerful one environment than another. And some things are going to be more powerful on the mobile device. If our learners need to go out into the field, and I mean a literal field, maybe an agricultural worker, and needs to

be able to fix a tractor, or needs to be able to determine how much water a crop needs, they would use a mobile devices probably to help them through that process. So why not teach them while they're in the field with the mobile device? So I believe that the place should be authentic to where the knowledge and skill is going to be used.

Connie: That's a good guideline for design. Speaking of design, you have a whitepaper on designing blended learn, can you walk us through your recommended process?

Jennifer: Yes. The question that we get asked most often, and you probably get asked it too, Connie, is how do we know if we can deliver a course via a particular technology. How do we know if eLearning is appropriate, how do we know if virtual classroom is appropriate. What my recommendation is—and that's what this whitepaper walks you through—is not to focus on project management, for example, as a subject, and can I teach project management via eLearning. Take a look at each individual learning objective and use that as the basis for your blend. So we have a four-step process which I could two days to teach but I'm going to try to narrow it down.

The first step is you reaffirm what these instructional goals and performance objectives are. To me it's easy to remember that the instructional goal is what's in it for the company, what's in it for the person paying for the development, how is it going to help an organization improve performance on the macro level. And then performance objectives to me are what's in it for the learner, what is it my learner is going to know that they didn't know before, what skill do they have that they didn't have before the training, where are they approaching mastery. It's important to really identify what these are on paper before you move on to the next step of the blended learning design process.

The second step is to take each of these objectives and determine some potential assessment techniques for each objective. I don't mean create a test, but determine how you will—as a designer or as a facilitator—know that your learner is reaching the level of mastery that you need them to get to during the learning process. For example, if you've got a knowledge-based objective what are the five steps of the proposed project management process? Define the five steps or list the five steps, that's a knowledge-based objective. And I can test that in a self-paced format, I can do that in an eLearning test, for example, I can take a quiz, or I can read and post to a discussion board. But because I can test it in a self-paced format I can probably deliver that content or teach that content in a self-paced format so it's appropriate.

Maybe one of our objectives for this project management class is manage a project team. How would I know that Connie can manage a team, I probably need to watch you

interact and ask questions and manage resources. Since I would need to observe that to know if Connie knew how to do it, I would probably teach that content in a live class because that's where the assessment would take place. In that case the assessment might be just observation, it might be the completion of a role play, it might be a simulation, but we probably need a more live intervention for that particular objective.

Connie: And when you talk about live, I want to make sure the audience know. If you're talking also about virtual.

Jennifer: Virtual and face-to-face. What we've done now is we've said okay this has to be taught in a live class. And then next step is how critical is failure, isn't it, because if I'm teaching heart transplants, and I know a lot of people who are doing this using teleconferencing and stuff, but I still want my trainer there. If criticality of failure is so great that it's either very expensive or very dangerous, I probably want a more live intervention. And that's just my opinion. But determining what these potential assessments are, it says okay this can be eLearning and then you could identify what type of eLearning you have available to you. What this second step does is provide options for your blend.

The third step is determining what level of collaboration you need between your learners, because sometimes learning content with other people and discussing it with other people improves the outcome. Why bring people together if they aren't working together, if they aren't learning from each other? And I think that's why so-called webinars have gotten such bad reputations. Because we bring thirty people together for an hour and the last three minutes we ask if they have any questions. Why do they need to be there at the same time, they could have watched a recording, it would have been an equivalent experience. So that's actually my rule of thumb, if they could have watched the recording and had an equivalent experience then that probably could have been something that self-paced would have been option for, or video would have been an option for. That helps me determine the level of collaboration.

And then the last step is getting back to the concept of authenticity. Where are people going to be using the skills that we're teaching them? It needs to be an authentic training environment. So if they're going to use the skills at their desk, like Excel Pivot Tables, then the virtual desktop is a great option. But if it's a face-to-face skill, like face-to-face sales or delivering a performance review in an office environment, then that objective is probably more authentically delivered in a face-to-face environment.

What I would like to do is very quickly summarize the four steps. Step one is identify your instructional goals and performance objectives. It's a good time to reaffirm that

you're using the right ones. Step two is determine potential assessment needs and techniques for each objective. My rules of thumb here are if you can test it in a particular environment you can teach it in that environment. And if you're not going to bother assessing it, think about whether or not you're going to require teaching it. If you're not going to assess it then maybe it's supplemental information and not a required part of your blend. Step three, you determine if collaboration would improve the learning outcomes, because why are we bringing people together at the same time if they aren't working together. And the last step, step four, within out blended environment determine if the virtual classroom or eLearning or whatever you're thinking about using at this point is authentic. If learners are going to use the skills at their desk, then we should probably teach them the skill at their desk.

Connie: That's a very nice design approach, I like it. I especially like where you're looking at whether it's collaborative or not.

Jennifer: Thank you, Connie, I appreciate that, it's nice hearing that from other people that are doing the work.

Connie: You had mentioned that sometimes there is a problem with the flipped classroom, getting people to do pre-work before the start of a course or a learning experience. How can you encourage the busy adult learner to do the required pre-work before getting together virtually as in a flipped classroom?

Jennifer: The flipped classroom is really another term for the blended classroom where content that learners are better off learning on their own, the knowledge-based content, the exercises and activities where people need a more thoughtful approach, they do that work on their own time, and when they get together for a live experience, whether it be virtual classrooms or face-to-face, they use it to collaborate, and that time is also used with the subject matter expert allowing them to practice experiences. And it's a great model because it's a great way to use time in a most efficient way. But in this environment we have trained people not to do pre-work. If it was important they will do it when we get to class.

If you have you got a larger blend, multiple virtual sessions, face-to-face class, a lot of eLearning, I would suggest first of all you start off with a live virtual class as the first lesson. It can be short, you get people introduced, explain why it's important to them, you explain what the advantages of doing all the self-directed work are, and you really lay out what the calendar looks like. I find that much of the problem with getting learners to do all the work in the blend is that they don't understand what the expectations are. We build these wonderful classes and all of the live events wind up in their calendars,

but we don't tell them ahead of time there is going to be ten hours of pre-work or ten hours of self-directed work. What we do tell them, they don't know what that means, is it all one day, is it 30 minutes at a time? So when you're introducing the class, when I'm signing up for the class I should have a curriculum map or a course map that explains all the lessons, whether they be live, they be eLearning, social collaborative, whatever the lesson is, in the order in which they're going to be delivered and how much time a learner might expect to put into each piece so people know what they're signing up for. Because I truly believe that most learners want to be able to improve their skillset, and if they realize that each component of our blend was important, they would work towards making sure everything was accomplished to the best of their ability.

My first tip is to start with a live class to set expectations. The second tip is send out a course map, visual course map which explains ahead of time what the requirements are in order to fully master everything in this program. And then that course map can also be shared with a supervisor so they understand what the time commitment is. You mentioned adult learners, at some point individual might check out or not participate in a particular lesson, that's something we all need to learn to say okay if somebody decides to check out, they've decided that that wasn't important to them and we need to decide as an organization if that's okay or not, what pieces are okay. But every piece of a blend should be at least set up as being required, because if it's not required it's not going to get done by anyone. You hear so often, "If you read the pre-work you would have seen this," or, "How many of you managed to get to the reading?" and you ask for a raise of hands. What we've done is annoyed everyone that did do the reading because, "Hey, I thought it was required." And everyone who didn't do the reading would say, "See, I told you she would tell me all the important stuff when I got to class."

Connie: Good point. Before we wrap up, I just want to ask you have you seen any common mistakes that designers make when creating a blended learning program?

Jennifer: Yes. There are always mistakes and we'll find better and better ways to make mistakes I think looking forward. The first idea I would like to talk about trying to make a piece of technology do something it wasn't designed to do. We've invested in WebEx so let's do WebExes every Friday, or I've learned how to use Adobe Presenter so everything is going to be in Adobe Presenter. Not every piece of content fits into every technology. So we need to match the best delivery technology to the performance objective. Technology selection—and I get to a purist—should be the last step of the design process. Once we decide what we're teaching, the objectives and the goals, and how we're going to assess it, then we can start to do our technology selection.

Connie: Do you what's funny about that, when I was getting my degree in instructional design 20 years ago, that's what they taught us.

Jennifer: Me too.

Connie: They taught us to choose technology last, and for all of these years I said no one does it like that. People come to me and say I want eLearning or I want mobile.

Jennifer: Connie, you are the eLearning coach, so people come to you for eLearning. And my company is InSync, we've always done synchronous, which is now virtual training. So when people come to us they've designed the solution in their head.

Connie: But now we can say this can actually work, we can select the technology in an effort to build an experience.

Jennifer: We can. And people that are accustomed to using technology in their daily lives are going to expect that. The reality is that locking people up three days in a classroom, we set that up as the Cadillac of training, the best training happens in the classroom. The reality is that that's not true, how much information can we possibly remember when we're away from our desk and we're away from our homes, it's a stressful situation and it's impossible for me as a learner to retain all of that information. Learning in the smaller chunks that are designed in a way that best deliver the message, whether it be micro-learning, support, virtual classroom, we can do some wonderful things. And it's really, I would argue, a better way to learn, not because I'm sorry we couldn't send you to a real class, but this is the best way to learn.

Connie: Right. Now the motivation should no longer be we can't afford it, we don't want you traveling, this aligns more with how the human brain works.

Jennifer: And another mistake people made or things that we should avoid is trying to manage a blend by ourselves. There is a lot of administration, how do we everybody is taking all the required parts or they have all the right technology. There is designing for multiple technologies and virtual classrooms. I couldn't design for a mobile device, I don't know anything about it, but if I was the only designer, the only expert on the team, I would probably make mistakes because it's impossible to be expert at all of these delivery technologies. So it takes a village, even if it's just lunch, when we all get together and say okay what am I missing? Don't design in a vacuum.

Connie: I might make a T-shirt that says, "Don't design in a vacuum."

Jennifer: I would buy one. I'll make one with you. I'm in.

Connie: Co-design it. Do you have any final words or advice to people who are designing their first blended learning program?

Jennifer: Two pieces of advice. Don't start with a mission critical program where a learner will fail at their job if the blend doesn't work. Start with a piece of content or a course that had a requirement where many people need to participate but it's not mission critical. For example, compliance training in general is often required and everybody needs to take it, if we can create it in a blended learning format that makes it more interesting and helps us retain the content, that would be great for blended learning. And if it wasn't perfect the first time, nobody likes compliance training anyway, but if we're rolling out a whole new system, a customer relationship management system to the sales team, for example, and say they're going to walk in and that's the system they need to use, but the blended learning program didn't work, either because we didn't know how to implement it well as an organization, we didn't use the right technologies, we were new to the process. That affects their job and they're going to blame the learning. So start with programs where you can be successful, get to a lot of people, and I would say build up slowly.

Connie: That's a great idea.

Jennifer: And my second piece of advice is keep the blend as simple as it needs to be. If you just need to be on the phone talking to people, just have a conference call, you don't need to add video and slides and animations, use the simplest technology that supports your learning objective. That makes it accessible to a wider audience of learners and it also builds confidence that we can be successful with technology.

Connie: Two great pieces of advice that I don't think newbies would have thought of. Thank you so much for your time and wisdom, Jennifer. It was really a great chat.

Jennifer: Thank you, Connie, I really appreciate the opportunity to talk about this. It's so important and it changes all the time.

I hope you found this discussion valuable. I'm wondering how many of you are designing blended learning. If you have design tips that you would like to share please do so in the comments on the show notes page at thelearningcoach.com/podcasts/25.