Volume 3, Issue 2

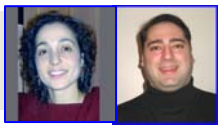
Live and Learn

Spring, 2006

A learning and performance newsletter published by effectPerformance, Inc.

Five Approaches to Blended Learning:
A White Paper Preview

By Karen Marker & Gus Prestera
Instructional Designers



EDITOR'S NOTE: Is blended learning just a here today, gone tomorrow concept, or is it here to stay? When our team first began to consider this question, our reaction was that a buzzword, popularized in professional journals and promulgated by sales people working for training companies, couldn't be long for this world. After all, isn't blended learning just a new word for something we've been doing for years? However, as we began to look at the research and reflect upon our own methods for designing curricula, the concept of blending began to take on more significance for us. The following is an excerpt from a white paper written by Karen Marker and Gus Prestera with input from several other effectPerformance designers. The paper describes five approaches to blending derived from a review of the blended learning literature.

Blended learning is here to stay. A 2004 online survey of 268 learning professionals by the vendor Balance Learning Limited reported that "Blended learning is viewed as the most effective and efficient form of training," (Sparrow, 2004: p. 52) with 77 percent of U.S. organizations currently using blended learning, and its use expected to increase by 2006 to nearly a third of all training options employed Sparrow, 2004: p. 52).

After reviewing articles and commentaries by a range of practitioners and after reflecting on our own experiences with clients, we identified five distinct approaches for designing blended learning solutions.

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Approach	Description	Best Suited For…
1. Stitching	Combining different media and delivery technologies based on cost/benefit profile	Leveraging existing resources and minimizing costs
2. Styles	Matching the media and delivery technology with audience learning styles	Increasing participation in training and raising learner satisfaction
3. Bookend	Sequencing instruction such that e-learning comes before and after instructor-led training or such that instructor-led training comes before and after e-learning	Optimizing the time and investment involved with instructor-led training
4. Integrated	Develop a cohesive strategy for addressing a learning need that integrates multiple learning activities and involves both formal and informal learning	Developing mission-critical skills
5. Performance	Develop a cohesive strategy for addressing a performance need, leveraging not only formal and informal learning but also non-training performance improvement interventions	Addressing performance gaps

In This Issue:

Designer's Toolbox:
Critical Incident Method

By Alicia Pfaff
Instructional Designer

Critical Incident Method (CIM) is a performance-based approach that can help you structure your task analysis, even when the subject matter is highly complex.

A critical incident can be an observed or experienced workplace event (e.g., a use case, story, or anecdote), preferably one that highlights effective and ineffective job behaviors that occur frequently as well as the positive and negative consequences of those behaviors. Critical incidents are collected through interviews, surveys, and reports; and then grouped, prioritized, and analyzed for performance gaps (see Figure 1).

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The Gestalt

Gestalt is a German word meaning configuration. In the early 1900s, Max Wertheimer, one of the founders of Gestalt Psychology, was influenced by Austrian philosopher Christian von Ehrenfels, who pointed out that if you play 6 notes to form a melody, then change the notes to a different key, you still recognize the melody… even though the individual parts are different.

This led Wertheimer to ask: "Is it really true that when I hear a melody I have a sum of individual tones…[or that] what I hear of each individual note, …is itself determined by the character of the whole." At its core, Gestalt Theory asserts that phenomena (e.g., knowledge and skills) should not be studied merely in terms of their individual qualities, but rather in terms of their relation to the greater whole.

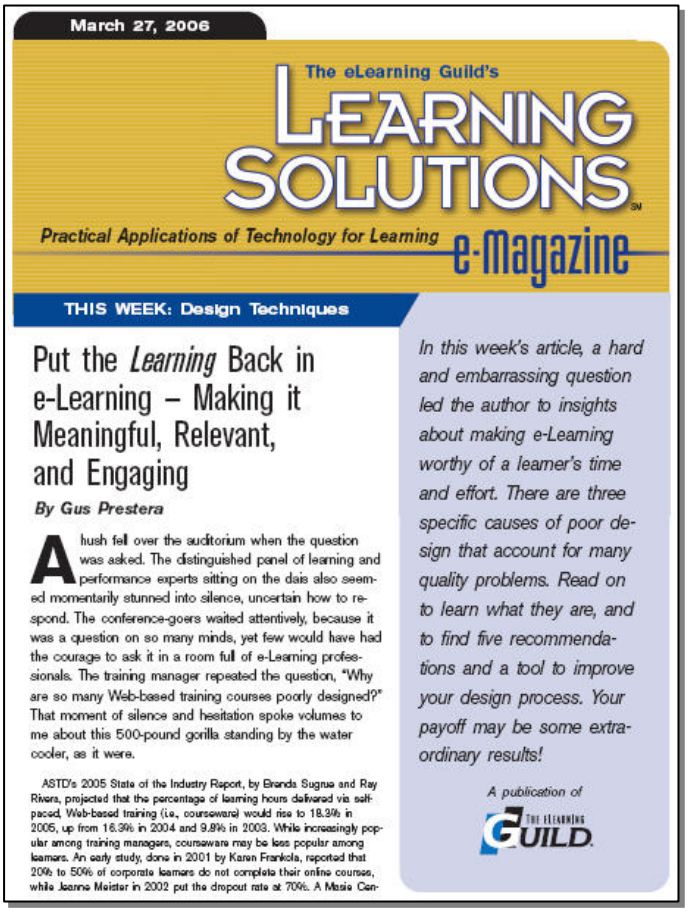
So what does this imply for instructional designers? Well, it suggests that it is not enough to chunk course content into bite-sized pieces… the designer also needs to give learners a sense of how the individual threads of knowledge and skills stitch together to form a quilt of workplace performance. Use advanced organizers, graphic organizers, and other techniques to synthesize facts, rules, procedures, and other content elements.

Another implication is that designers should avoid getting so consumed with achieving granular learning objectives that they forget the broader purpose of the training… to effect some change in workplace performance.

To learn more, visit the *Society for Gestalt Theory and Application* at http://gestalttheory.net/. ◆

Putting the Learning Back in e-Learning:
Gus Prestera's article featured in *Learning Solutions*

Featured in the March 27th issue of *Learning Solutions* e-magazine (published by the e-Learning Guild) is Gus Prestera's rant on the design practices that help to make effective e-learning courseware meaningful, relevant, and engaging… and the practices that make so many courses meaningless, abstract, and boring. To receive a copy of the issue, visit http://www.elearningguild.com or email us at info@effectperformance.com. ◆


March 27, 2006

The eLearning Guild's
LEARNING SOLUTIONS
Practical Applications of Technology for Learning
e-Magazine

THIS WEEK: Design Techniques

Put the *Learning* Back in e-Learning – Making it Meaningful, Relevant, and Engaging

By Gus Prestera

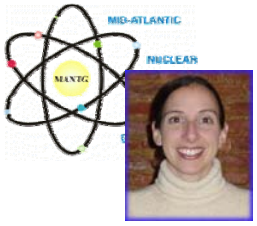
A hush fell over the auditorium when the question was asked. The distinguished panel of learning and performance experts sitting on the dais also seemed momentarily stunned into silence, uncertain how to respond. The conference-goers waited attentively, because it was a question on so many minds, yet few would have had the courage to ask it in a room full of e-Learning professionals. The training manager repeated the question, "Why are so many Web-based training courses poorly designed?" That moment of silence and hesitation spoke volumes to me about this 500-pound gorilla standing by the water cooler, as it were.

ASTD's 2005 State of the Industry Report, by Brenda Sugrue and Ray Rivera, projected that the percentage of learning hours delivered via self-paced, Web-based training (i.e., courseware) would rise to 18.3% in 2005, up from 16.3% in 2004 and 9.8% in 2003. While increasingly popular among training managers, courseware may be less popular among learners. An early study, done in 2001 by Karen Frankola, reported that 20% to 50% of corporate learners do not complete their online courses, while Jeanne Meister in 2002 put the dropout rate at 70%. A Masie Cen-

In this week's article, a hard and embarrassing question led the author to insights about making e-Learning worthy of a learner's time and effort. There are three specific causes of poor design that account for many quality problems. Read on to learn what they are, and to find five recommendations and a tool to improve your design process. Your payoff may be some extraordinary results!

A publication of The eLearning Guild

Upcoming Events



Managing the Unmanageable SME

June 7, 2006 – Stacie Comolli will speak at the Instructor Workshop of the Mid-Atlantic Nuclear Training Group (MANTG) in Gettysburg, PA. Stacie has interviewed a number of instructional designers and researched best practices for conducting content gathering interviews. She will share her findings, and participants will have the opportunity to practice applying her interviewing techniques. Visit http://www.mantg.com/ for details. ◆

Five Approaches to Blended Learning

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Approach #1: Stitching Multiple Media and Technologies

The *Stitching* approach involves delivering related content using a variety of training media and delivery technologies. For example, we could choose to supplement an instructor-led training course with pre-work consisting of an online reading assignment, a video shown during class, a paper-based job aid given in class, and a posttest delivered online. The media and delivery technologies are often selected for their cost-benefit and ROI profile. Some proponents of blended learning feel this is an overly simplistic approach and does *not*, in fact, constitute blending.

Approach #2: Addressing Individual Learning Styles

The *Styles* approach is concerned with matching the right media and delivery technology with the individual's learning style. With this approach, the ***same*** content is produced in multiple formats to appeal to learners who, for example, learn best by seeing, hearing or interacting with content, working alone or interacting with a group.

There is an inherent redundancy to this approach. Though research supports the notion that different people learn best under different conditions (Grabowski, & Jonassen, 1993), there is little empirical support for the notion that providing the ***same*** instructional content in multiple media formats and delivery methods leads to significant gains for the organization.

Approach #3: Using e-learning Bookends

Using the popular *Bookend* approach, designers seek to reduce content presentation lectures that can make instructor-led training so lengthy and burdensome, and instead use an e-learning→instructor-led training→e-learning delivery sequence. In the instructor-led portion, learners experience hands-on role play exercises and classroom projects.

Critics single out this approach as promoting a limited view of blended learning. There is a tendency to bookend as a cookie-cutter approach that ignores situational differences.

Another criticism is that this approach ignores the wide variety of media and delivery technologies available, giving preference to courseware and instructor-led combinations.

Approach #4: Integrating Your Blended Strategy

The *Integrated* approach is characterized by a ***cohesive*** strategy that integrates multiple learning experiences over time. Delivery methods can include a wide variety of formats and encompass both *formal* and *informal* learning.

A progression could start with a coaching session; proceed to independent learning assignments, take place in parallel with a collaborative project run with peers, and eventually transition to a community of practice.

One criticism of this approach is that it can yield overly-complex strategies that are difficult and costly to implement. It's an approach that should probably only be used with mission-critical skills.

Approach #5: Performance-based Blending

Proponents of Human Performance Technology argue that blending training with more training misses the boat entirely… that if anything, blending training with non-training interventions is the key to unlocking the potential of blended learning.

Whereas the Integrated approach broadens blended learning to include informal as well as formal training methods, media, and technologies, the Performance approach broadens it further to address organizational needs with *non-training* methods. With this approach, the designer pursues a comprehensive solution to a systemic problem. The solution could include formal training and informal training as well as performance improvement interventions such as documenting and re-engineering jobs, aligning incentives, aligning goals, and providing adequate resources.

This approach recognizes the fact that most performance problems cannot be adequately addressed by training interventions alone. It frees designers from the traditional constraints of only being able to provide training solutions, enabling designers to contribute to organizational success. On the other hand, it places a much greater burden of responsibility on the designer… a burden that many designers are not able or willing to embrace, let alone accept.

To read the entire paper, please go to www.effectPerformance.com or email us at info@effectperformance.com. ◆

Gus Prestera, PhD, CPT

Doc Talk

In early April, I spoke at the 2006 ISPI Conference in Dallas. While there, I attended the keynote speech by Dan Pink, best-selling author of *A Whole New Mind* and *Free Agent Nation*. Pink argues that the era of "left brain" dominance—and the information age it created—is giving way to a new era of "right brain" dominance.

Today, any routine work that can be proceduralized is increasingly being automated or off-shored to legions of overseas white-collar workers. To compete in the global market for high-paying jobs, American workers must seek out new ways to differentiate themselves.

In other words, while left brain analytical skills and rationality are still important, increasingly, right brain creative skills and empathy serve as the key differentiators, for both individuals and organizations.

What does that imply for ISD? While the procedural skills of analyzing needs and tasks, developing training, and evaluating learning are important, we should place greater emphasis on our ability to design, tell stories, synthesize, empathize, play, and help others find meaning in their work. Currently, the training and development of instructional designers focuses heavily on teaching them how to perform systematic, analytical procedures. Does anyone besides me see this as a problem? ◆

Designer's Toolbox:
Critical Incident Method

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When to Use It

CIM is most useful when analyzing jobs that have many possible acceptable behaviors. In other words, there is no one right way of performing the job, but there are some behaviors that are more *effective* than others and some behaviors that are more *ineffective* than others (see figure 2).

For example, I am currently re-designing a compliance certification course. The existing course communicates facts about current privacy regulations, and then tests the learner's ability to recall those facts. The problem is that learners fail to transfer that knowledge to the job. The course and test are abstract. So how do we design a course that communicates the policies in the context of job-relevant behaviors?

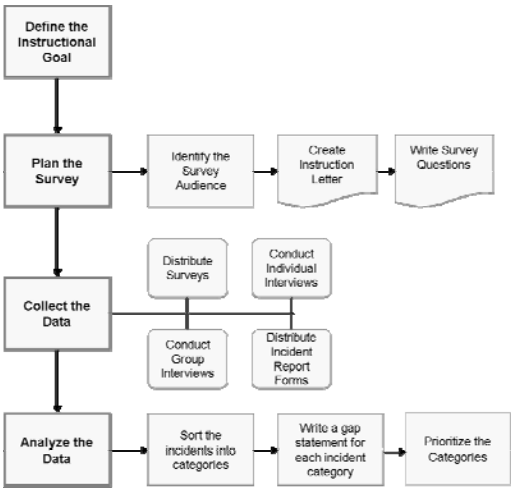

Figure 1: Process model depicting the Critical Incident Method (CIM)

Through CIM, I collect incidents that describe how policies have been properly interpreted and complied with as workers performed their jobs, and the positive consequences. In addition, I collect incidents that highlight common mistakes that workers make when interpreting policies and specific behaviors that they engage in that make them non-compliant with the policies… as well as the negative consequences. All are embedded in real-life situations.

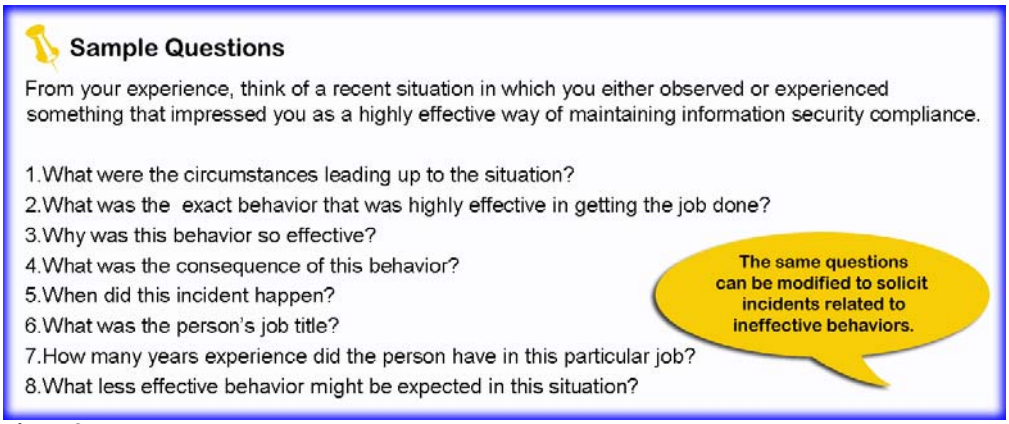

Figure 2

The Process

(1) Plan: After defining the scope of behaviors that you will examine, identify and recruit participants. Participants should have field experience working with your target audience or be in a position to observe them at work.

(2) Collect:

- **Survey** – Used to solicit large number of incidents
- **Interview –** Used to explore incidents in detail
- **Log** (Diary) – Used to capture incidents as they occur over time

(3) Analyze: Group incidents into categories with each category corresponding to a performance gap, and then prioritize the categories.

Analysis Tool

Figure 2 provides a brief list of questions to help participants report specific behaviors that directly influence the instructional goal. The questions are similar regardless of the data collection method you choose.

Editor's Note: Alicia Pfaff is an Instructional Designer for effectPerformance, Inc. She recently completed her Masters Thesis, which involved a review of task analysis methods. If you are interested in learning more, please contact Alicia at apfaff@effectperformance.com. Look for another task analysis method to be presented in the July issue.

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