MAXIMIZING ENGAGEMENT IN DIGITAL BLENDED TRAINING

by Maggie Shibley

Digital blended training is an emerging modality with a lot of potential. We have all experienced the challenges and limitations of in-person, online and virtual training. Digital blended training allows for the flexibility of online training while also leveraging the engagement of live events. However, it is not enough to take your existing training and simply repackage it in a new modality.

At The Center for Leadership Studies, we rebuilt our flagship course natively in the digital blended modality. Using a learning platform, we created an experiential course that utilizes social and collaborative elements in addition to live virtual sessions to keep learners engaged over several weeks of training. The social learning elements allow learners to connect and engage with their peers at their own convenience by reading each other's insights and commenting or liking each other's responses to the training content. It is these social elements that have been the key to long-term engagement while delivering learning that can be consumed in the flow of work.

This approach to digital blended training creates an environment where learners can interact with their peers and engage with the training content at their own pace, taking time to reflect before coming back to share their insights. This prolonged engagement with the training content facilitates greater understanding and retention.

GATHERING DATA

Over the past year, we have gathered data on our digital blended training to determine strengths and weaknesses. This data allows us to refine our approach and create more immersive experiences moving forward. The purpose of collecting this data is to identify which learning elements create the most interactions.

In addition, by comparing engagement levels between instances of a specific learning element, we can also use this data to extrapolate some best practices in crafting content. It's not enough to simply look at numbers to determine engagement (quantity); we must also consider the effort and time investment required from the learner for each interaction (quality). As the digital blended modality continues to grow and evolve, utilizing data in this way will be a key differentiator that will allow organizations to continue to improve their content and engagement.

The following learning elements are organized in order, starting with the items that received the most consistent engagement down to the items that received less interaction in comparison.

1] VIDEOS

Videos have long been a tried-and-true method of delivering content to remote learners, and this is in many ways still the case with digital blended learning. Requiring little effort from the learner, it can be a go-to element for the one-way transfer of information. Our data reflects consistently high views with videos throughout the learning experience in comparison to other learning elements.

Best Practices:

→ Use a variety of video genres to avoid overuse and learner fatigue. Consider using case studies, motion graphics, direct-to-camera, interviews and more to keep the delivery fresh and interesting.

→ Find a balance between static text and videos so that learners don't get bored with either format.

→ Add summaries for each video so that when revisiting content, learners don't have to replay the video to remember the key points.

> **SOCIAL LEARNING ELEMENTS ALLOW LEARNERS TO ENGAGE WITH THEIR PEERS BY READING EACH OTHER'S INSIGHTS AND COMMENTING ON EACH OTHER'S RESPONSES.**

2] SUBMISSION ASSIGNMENTS

Submission assignments are an opportunity to check learner knowledge in a variety of creative ways. Learners can submit completed handouts, videos, text responses and much more. Then they can also view and engage with their peers' submissions. Our data found that submission assignments had high participation. This is especially significant given that submission assignments require more effort from the learner by asking them to take what they have learned or their experiences and provide their own reflections and insights.

Best Practices:

→ Use submission assignments where it counts. Because they require more effort from the learner, it's important not to overuse submission assignments and risk lower participation. Instead, use them in high-impact learning moments to capture insightful learner responses.

→ Use public submissions when possible, to allow learners to see each other's submissions.

→ If asking participants to be critical of themselves, use private submissions to ensure privacy and honesty.

→ Provide multiple ways for a learner to submit their response. For example, allowing both written and video submissions.

3] LIVE SESSIONS

Effective live sessions are a critical part of digital blended training as they are the learner's opportunity to interact with a facilitator who is a content expert. However, they also present the biggest scheduling challenge and time commitment for the learner for a single sitting. Our data found that live sessions fell around the middle of participation in comparison with other learning elements. However, the opportunity for learners to interact with a facilitator and ask questions is invaluable.

Best Practices:

→ Live sessions need to be impactful. Use them in places where the

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PARTICIPATION RANKING

This ranking reflects the engagement levels between digital blended learning elements from our data, from most interactions to least interactions, while also taking into account the quality of those interactions.

1] VIDEOS   4] DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

2] SUBMISSION ASSIGNMENTS   5] POLLS

3] LIVE SESSIONS   6] QUIZZES

learning is critical and can be greatly enhanced by a facilitated activity.

➡ If possible, be consistent with the time and day of the week the live sessions occur so that they are easier for learners to keep track of.

➡ Allow time for Q&A segments. This is your learners' opportunity to make sure they are understanding the content they have learned so far, both from the live session and from the digital platform.

➡ Provide a pre-recorded option for learners to view afterward if they are unable to attend the live session so that they can still engage with the rest of the course.

4] DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Discussion questions offer an opportunity to gather learner responses in a familiar, forum format. It's easy for participants to like and reply to each other's responses and learn from each other. Our data reflected moderate participation in discussion questions. They were used frequently throughout the course, giving participants opportunities to pick and choose where they wanted to engage further.

Best Practices:

➡ Ask open-ended questions that elicit long, thoughtful responses.

➡ Don't use discussion questions to ask questions with a "correct" answer. You don't want everyone's responses to a discussion question to be the same.

➡ Rather than requiring participants to answer all discussion questions, give them the flexibility to respond to the ones that resonate with them.

5] POLLS

Polls are a low-effort interaction for learners to share basic information about themselves and their perspectives.

In comparison to other learning elements, polls fell on the lower end of participation. However, they were still useful in gathering at-a-glance takeaways on learners' reactions to key content.

Best Practices:

➡ When asking an open-ended question, follow up with a discussion question to allow learners to share more.

➡ Consider what you would want to know about your cohort as a learner and craft polls around eliciting those answers.

> ❝ ENGAGING CONTENT INCREASES THE REACH AND ACCESSIBILITY OF YOUR TRAINING. ❞

6] QUIZZES

Quizzes provide opportunities to check learners' knowledge and provide feedback on critical content. Quizzes were not a widely used element in our digital blended course, as we found submission assignments often provided more insight into participants' understanding. However, quizzes can be very useful in course-corrected participants if you don't have other opportunities for feedback from a content expert, such as a facilitator, moderator or learning community coordinator throughout the course.

Best Practices:

➡ Use quizzes to check knowledge on key content, but be careful not to overuse them when other learning elements that enable more social interaction might be a better fit.

➡ Consider allowing for multiple attempts when testing challenging content.

➡ Make sure feedback provides the "why" behind the correct response to facilitate better understanding.

MOVING FORWARD WITH LESSONS LEARNED

One last best practice that can be applied to all of the previous learning elements is the use of a moderator, facilitator or learning community coordinator who can drive engagement and interaction with participants throughout the digital portion of the course. By interacting with discussion questions, submission assignments and more, they can tag specific learners, highlight themes and make connections unique to each cohort.

The digital blended modality allows organizations to provide training to individuals who might otherwise be missed due to travel costs, scheduling difficulties, lack of time and other challenges that hinder professional development. Creating engaging content that learners can access within the flow of work and at their own pace increases the reach and accessibility of your training.

Rather than falling back on the best practices for online or virtual training, it's important to look at digital blended as its own unique modality and play to its strengths. Consider how you can take your existing content and completely revisit it in a way that not only embraces the modality but also accommodates the new ways of working that this modality represents — a flexible, individualized, hybrid experience. ⏱

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