RETHINKING BLENDED LEARNING FOR LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Perceptive Research – IESE’s Giuseppe Auricchio
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“The old fashioned definition of blended learning is, in my view, some sort of combination of live virtual classroom with perhaps a face-to-face meeting and some other things that you might ask people to do. I think that is it, and I don’t know that we do blended learning. But… for me blended learning is some way of enabling a leadership journey, a development plan that doesn’t just get stuck in a single event. Blended learning for me is all that we do to help a leader be successful. And what my team does is play the role of a journey architect.”

Research quote, from a senior LD practitioner, 2014

Blended learning has become a pet phrase of executive learning program designers over the last half-decade, and perhaps symbolizes the multiple understandings and mismatched levels of sophistication that have come to define how organizations approach new opportunities in adult education.

Dr Giuseppe Auricchio, Executive Director of Learning Innovation at IESE Business School, explores beliefs and attitudes about blended learning in recent research he conducted during his participation in the Penn CLO program, an executive doctoral program designed for senior level learning and talent development leaders. In line with the opening quote, Auricchio suggests that today those who are at the forefront of leadership development see blended learning as a much more expansive and all-encompassing approach, than just mixing some online content with face-to-face sessions. Today, the opportunity for CLOs is “to integrate all formal and informal learning methodologies that are put in place to
leadership development programs have traditionally been about significant change, whereas online learning is often seen as a way to present and deliver content cheaply. However, Auricchio argues that digitalization can accelerate adoption of this integrative view of learning. Indeed, the current promise of digitalization has led many organizations to view learning as a hybrid approach—"blended learning"—where online tools are combined with traditional classroom methods.

The research Auricchio mentions identifies three key findings, which together shed light on the current status of blended learning in corporate leadership development. These findings are:

1. **LIMITS IN RESOURCES, CAPABILITIES AND COMPETENCIES**
   - Auricchio notes that digitalization can accelerate adoption of this integrative view of learning. Indeed, the current promise of digitalization has to do with its ability to act as a fabric that seamlessly brings together different contexts related to the same activity. This is the "blended" that is dramatically reshaping other industries. Retail, for example, is reinventing itself for the "omni-channel". As a result, not only are products accessible via different online and offline outlets (mobile device, brick and mortar stores, television, etc.), but data generated in these is mined to make useful recommendations to consumers.

2. **THE KEY RESEARCH FINDINGS**
   - Auricchio believes the conversation should shift from using online learning as a tool to enhance a program experience to leveraging digitalization as a fabric to enable an entirely new way of learning. Via digital tools, CLOs can link the many contexts where learning takes place - be it in a classroom, the workplace or on a customer’s premises. Furthermore, the data generated by a learner’s activity can make insights available to him/her in the right context and at the right moment in time. Conceived as this commitment, blended learning - or rather "omni-learning" - is exciting for all CLOs because of its promise of making learning an everyday activity for the executives they serve.

3. **DAMAGING HISTORIC PERCEPTIONS**
   - Firstly, there are enduring misconceptions around what modern online learning really is and can achieve. Auricchio suggests that this is primarily due to "current preconceptions about online learning." For many, the whole concept of online learning is still rigidly attached to poor experiences in both program design and content from the early-2000s. Senior executives, recalling their dull and unchallenging experiences of sales and regulatory online courses from that time, have no attraction to re-engage with online learning today. This conflation of blended learning with e-learning is particularly damaging for leadership development, which has traditionally been a high investment endeavour, where the learning experience is as critical to the outcome as the raw content. Auricchio also highlights the tension between online scalability and the focus on achieving the change that leadership development programs measure themselves by. Scalability, the ability to reach a mass audience cheaply is often seen as online learning's principal benefit - whereas leadership development programs have traditionally been about significant change outcomes for the participants with less of an eye on the cost of achieving that.

This tension continues today - with many executives still viewing e-learning as individual experiences, with participants following rigid processes, that fail to meet the experiential and reflective, group oriented requirements of andragogic learning as promoted by the likes of Lindeman as far back as 1925 and Knowles in the 1960s, and best known today through David Kolb's Learning Cycle, first published in 1984 and updated several times since. Auricchio notes that "understanding that online learning can be used to improve the effectiveness of a program, not only its efficiency, is a mental barrier that still exists in the minds of many, thus limiting its use."
basic infrastructure - such as widespread fast connectivity and common software, which are essential to delivering a consistent, high-quality experience for participants. This technological infrastructure weakness undermines the L&D managers' confidence to try out new methodologies, particularly at the executive level - where demands are so high.

This deficiency is further hindered by the culture that exists in many organizations; loosely summed up as "companies operating in industries and markets that are more stable are also more risk averse and will favour more established approaches to executive development." Auricchio's study highlighted that attitudes to and familiarity with technology also played a key role in adoption. Noting that “…in companies in which online learning is seen as a natural extension of typical day-to-day interactions, adoption of a blended learning model is far easier.”

**MISALIGNMENT FOR LEARNER’S NEEDS**

The third core finding of the research focuses on the specific characteristics of the population of learners Auricchio studied; i.e. senior executives. It is in the unique needs of this, “top 10% of the organization” cohort that Auricchio believes lies the biggest challenge for the adoption blended learning to overcome.

First, learning leaders interviewed for this study believe senior executives’ expectations of development programs “are focused more on the social benefits they derive from interacting with peers than on learning new concepts… Auricchio found that neither knowledge transfer nor skill practice are the primary goals of executive development; rather, through their programs learning leaders look for an opportunity to network. This goal, which can be perhaps better described as “building social capital”, is the primary purpose of executive development, and can perhaps only be achieved through face-to-face experiences.

Further, while participants that are offsite are “naturally” focused (as they are confined to a classroom), this is difficult to achieve online given the unpredictability of senior executive’s working days. As one learning leader puts it:

> “When you think about this population, there is always something that is urgent pulling at them… When they get to a program they’re much more able to be present. I think when they’re trying to do this on their own, the distractions that they have about the real world of their life just pulls them away. They may have the best intentions but reality is that they have really big, busy jobs that are always demanding their attention.”

This creates uncertainty as to how much senior participants will achieve online, and can lead to the unsatisfactory outcome where only a subset have engaged properly with the material, which has led to incentives being put into the program to ensure participants travel through their ‘learning journeys’. However most of these incentives tend to be negative ones - exams and assessments with the risk of failure rather than positive reward - which clearly do little to improve the status of online learning with the participants.

**ENSURING COMPETENCE IN BLENDED LEARNING**

While Auricchio’s research reveals a significant gap between what industry observers typically describe as being a pervasive use of blended learning in organizations and the reality within most companies, there is good news in his findings. Indeed, “the data confirms that learning leaders are not mindlessly jumping on the digital bandwagon. On the contrary, most are very aware of the ways in which an organization’s resources, a program’s learning objectives and the needs of participants inform program design choices - and specifically the use of online learning. In fact, in many contexts these factors limit its use, and this is something learning leaders are sensitive to.”

To begin with, in the absence of the proper technology and a culture that is supportive of executives working online, L&D teams are unwilling to experiment with blended learning. Rightly, there is no reason L&D should force executives to learn in a way that is different to how they do business day-to-day. Nor should they try doing so with sub-standard tools, inferior to those available to consumers.

Furthermore, L&D leaders recognize that blended learning is not a model that is suitable to address all learning needs. Senior executives are different from more junior colleagues, in this respect. As previously highlighted, unpredictable job demands make it difficult for such executives to focus on learning when their day is not formally dedicated to a program (as is the case in a residential program). Perhaps more importantly, executives also treasure the opportunity to establish relationships, build trust and share perspectives with peers (which residential programs allow).
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In contrast, non-executive learning programs are based upon a more cognitive approach to learning. In these programs, Auricchio suggests, “learners process information and then use this information to change the mental models they hold of the world in order to make them more accurate... knowledge is first shared and discussed before learners engage in application exercises...” This approach, typical of management development programs, is well suited to blended designs that allow knowledge to be delivered online, with face-to-face time devoted to reflection and a post-residential phase that guides participants in applying insights in the workplace.

Auricchio’s conclusion is that competence, with respect to combining online with face-to-face learning, is about not viewing a blended approach as a panacea. And realizing that different blends of modes and methodologies are possible, depending on the context of the development initiative. This basic instructional design principle is too often forgotten, and now more than ever should serve as a valuable compass to guide LD’s choices, so as to avoid the negative consequences of misplaced hype.

As an illustration of the importance of sound judgement, Auricchio suggests some opportunities for the use of online learning in programs for the executive level - some which may often be overlooked, but that are ideally suited to meet those particular learners’ needs. Firstly, Auricchio argues that most program designs severely underplay the objective of networking. While networking is widely recognized as an important benefit of executive programs, it is often seen as a by-product or side-benefit to their core purpose. Could face-to-face interactions be extended beyond the classroom and onto the social collaboration platforms executives are using in their private and professional lives? One might expect this to happen naturally. But perhaps, in the case of executive programs, it is more effective when purposefully built into a program’s design.

Second, for most senior executives the ability to stay on top of key trends and sensitive knowledge in the moment of need. In this case, the content executives would access may not be part of a formal course or program, but rather more granular knowledge available on demand, to be accessed by individuals based on their requirements, and drawn from varied virtual sources.

ASPIRING TO INTEGRATIVE OMNI-LEARNING

Is mere competence in blended learning enough, in today’s digital world? Auricchio believes that blended learning as traditionally conceived (i.e. the combination of face-to-face and online learning, albeit vastly better than a classroom-only alternative) is destined to become a relic of the past. Auricchio’s hope is that digitalization will soon fundamentally reshape the way in which learning happens, by bringing about what he and his colleagues at IESE Business School refer to as “omni-learning”.

Omnilearning is closely tied to the most fundamental impact of digitalization - which has to do with the blending of our online and offline lives. Today, digital technology facilitates nearly all of our activities; from shopping for groceries to collaborating on projects, digitalization is bringing online and offline together in radically different consumer experiences. As a result, we live “blended lives”—constantly online and offline.

Learning experts, by using the term “blended learning” since the 1960s, have led us to believe they were aware of this phenomenon for some time, and indeed prepared to take advantage of the opportunities it offers for learning. Auricchio’s research proves that perhaps their confidence is misplaced. L&D’s interpretation of “blending” as the purposeful mix of two contexts, online and face-to-face, which are distinct falls short of the “blended” that digitalization is enabling in other aspects of our lives, where online and offline are indistinguishable.

“One can rethink blended learning as “omni-learning,” moving beyond the functional practice of combining learning modes to an integrative mindset linking the contexts where learning takes place, be it in a classroom, the workplace or on a customer’s premise”, Auricchio asks? He points to the many education technology startups that are emerging which in some way express this intuition. Examples include Degreed, a company that is engaged in the measurement, tracking, and validation of all the learning individuals do throughout their lives. Or Brainspace, a company that is focused on using data to personalize educational content - identifying exactly what a student knows, what he or she is struggling with, and recommending the best activities for that student to work on next. At the heart of all these companies is a belief that learning, ultimately, should be integrated into everyday activities. This pursuit is age-old quest amongst L&D practitioners, often referred to as the promise of “continuous learning”. Auricchio believes that while L&D’s intuition has been right all along, perhaps the tools available to us have not been suitable to bring it to life. Perhaps it is by viewing digital as the fabric that links contexts in which learning takes place, rather than distinguishing online from offline, and by leveraging the many opportunities such a fabric offers, that we can finally make the dream a reality.
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