

Learning Strategies

'Flexible Blended Learning' is widely recognised as the way forward by progressive educationists and trainers. Pisces associates have successfully applied blended learning design principles to develop courses, programmes and qualifications for a wide range of organisations and client groups.

What is flexible blended learning?

"Flexible blended learning' programmes often includes distance learning, whether computer or paper based, reducing reliance on expensive conventional face to face delivery, widening access, improving flexibility and often reducing costs long term.

Different learning approaches belong to one of three categories, each with different pros and cons. A flexible blended learning programme may include approaches from each category, or restrict itself to just one.

There is no single right way, other than to understand the needs of your learners and to put them first when devising a strategy that your organisation can commit to and deliver.

1. Synchronous facility based learning

Synchronous facility based approaches require the learners, resources and teacher or facilitator to be present together in the same facility at the same time.

Conventional face to face delivery is the mainstay for many. It can be very effective, as learning is by its nature a social activity, interactive and dependant on feedback. However, although having the advantages of immediacy, responsiveness, and total immersion within a supportive social environment, there are disadvantage. Within large organisations or industry sectors composed primarily of SMEs with dispersed learners, a total reliance on synchronous face to face delivery can be prohibitively expensive, and 'blended learning' is required.

Pisces would always advise clients to include some synchronous face to face facility based learning within the blend, most importantly at the beginning of a programme. Personal relationships can then form between learners and their facilitator, developing trust and creating a support network that can be sustained thereafter.

2. Synchronous distance learning

Some distance learning approaches are synchronous, requiring learners and their teacher or facilitator to be engaged in learning at the same time, but not in the same place.

Although not as social, effective support can be provided through various means, as 'real time' communication can be encouraged and facilitated. By its nature, there is a greater reliance on ICT.

3. Asynchronous distance learning

Distance learning approaches that are not dependent on real time communication between learners and their peers or learners and their facilitator are known as 'asynchronous'. The learner can learn at any time, and, with the use of portable communication devices, in any place that suits them. It offers the ultimate in flexibility, but requires learners to be mature and motivated, with good learning skills.

Whilst interaction within the group of learners and between them and their facilitator can continue, responses and feedback are often delayed. There is a greater reliance, not just on ICT, but also well designed interactive learning, rich in formative assessment and feedback to compensate for the limited real time personal contact and immediate personal assistance.

Many factors will influence the learning strategy and ultimate 'blend' of learning approaches and delivery methods chosen

Detailed examples of delivery approaches and methods are categorised

Table 1 Synchronous facility based learning

Learning approach	Delivery methods	Resources	ICT support
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presentations 	Peers Visiting speakers Recorded presentation	Flip chart Whiteboard	PowerPoint Video /DVD
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interactive Lectures 	Question and answer Brainstorming	Flip chart White Board Post its	Electronic Whiteboards Voting system
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitated resource based learning 	Task based learning Project work Information research	Exercises Worksheets Handouts Structured case study Library	VLE CD ROM Internet
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Group Work 	Discussion or debate Workshop break out	Note books Flip chart	Audio / Video recorder
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Practical activity 	Instruction Practice and consolidation Simulation	Task dependent Workplace Mock work place	Digitally recorded instruction E portfolio Simulator

Table 2 Distance learning

Learning approach	Methods	Synchronous	Asynchronous
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presentations 	Live forecasting	Yes	No
	Recorded programme on TV or CD or VLE		Yes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interactive lectures 	Video conferencing suite	Yes	
	PC based conferencing	Yes	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resource based learning 	Structured paper based learning packages	No	Yes
	VLE based learning	No	Yes
	Learning assisted by hand held devices	No	Yes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Practical activity 	Work placement - personal skills development	No	Yes
	On Line portfolio -	No	Yes
	Reflective log Evidence of competence		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaborative group activity 	On line blog	No	Yes
	Social networking	No	Yes