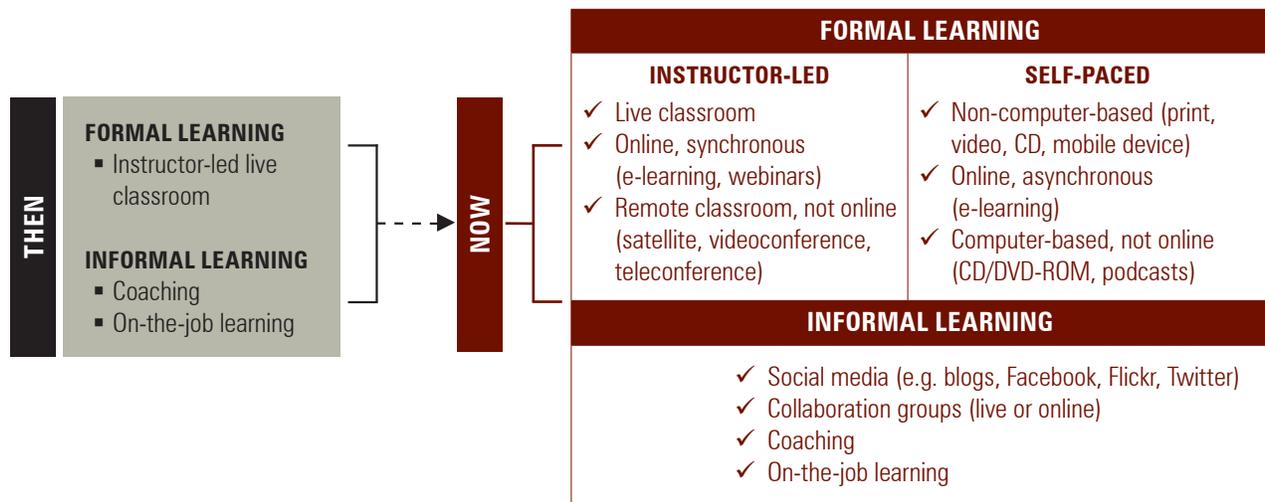


Using Learning Solutions to Achieve Performance Outcomes

INTRODUCTION

This paper provides an overview of the learning solutions being used by mainstream organizations to implement their broad learning strategies. The topics that are covered include current trends, predominant learning solutions, best practices in blended learning, and educational uses of Web 2.0 technology.



CURRENT TRENDS

Learning solutions are educational delivery methods that provide people with the knowledge and skills they need to enhance performance and achieve organizational goals. Contemporary work environments, with their increased complexity and pace of change, require people to be lifelong learners. Rapid technology changes over the last twenty years have brought dramatic shifts in the types and variety of learning solutions available to organizations. The current array of choices allows for more learner-centric and flexible approaches to training and development.

PRIMARY METHODS IN USE TODAY

Three learning solutions are most frequently used by U.S. organizations: **live classroom training, e-learning, and blended learning solutions.** *The 2009 State of the Industry Report*, published by The American Society for Training and Development (ASTD) summarizes data from 360 public and private sector organizations, including “best practice” organizations. The study found that the average percentage of formal learning hours delivered via instructor-led classrooms was 63.7 percent, while e-learning’s share of formal learning hours was 31.4 percent. Although live classroom instruction is still widely used, these figures reveal a **dramatic increase in online instruction.** ASTD data shows that the percentage of formal learning delivered online nearly tripled between 2001 and 2008 (from 11.5 percent to 31.4 percent). Some of this reported online learning was instructor-led, but self-paced e-learning was the most frequently used format.

Percentage of formal learning delivered online nearly tripled between 2001 and 2008

ASTD's report doesn't contain data on blended learning, per se. However, industry experts generally agree that blended learning solutions (a mixture of learning methods, often including an e-learning component) are rapidly becoming the norm, especially in enterprises with large, diverse audiences.

What are the **benefits** of these learning solutions? What are some **important best practices**? What **factors should you consider** in selecting which approach to use for your purposes? The next sections of this paper will address these questions.



LIVE CLASSROOM TRAINING

Learning that is conducted in real time, with the facilitator and participants meeting face-to-face. Live classrooms are characterized by instructor-to-learner and learner-to-learner interaction that takes place through the duration of the learning event. Classroom training typically uses a mixture of educational methods, such as content presentations, experiential activities, skills practice, and audio-visual media.

BENEFITS

Live classroom training has many benefits for organizations and learners. Some of these benefits include **strategic presentation of complex information**, opportunities for **relationship-building** and **collaboration, skills practice** with immediate feedback, and high-impact **experiential activities**. For instance, organization-critical and complicated material can be delivered in stages that allow the facilitator to assess learners' reactions and comprehension. Live classrooms can **facilitate networking, group cohesion, trust-building**, and other ancillary goals that might be linked to specific instructional objectives. A live classroom is the best venue for practicing certain work skills that cannot be learned virtually and/or require expert observation and in-the-moment feedback. Skillfully designed experiential activities can address real-life challenges in ways that can **powerfully motivate behavior change**.

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SELECTED BEST PRACTICES

- The organization conducts a **front-end analysis** to define desired outcomes and ensure relevance to learners' needs.
- The program uses an **"active training" approach** that maximizes learner involvement, interaction with peers, and opportunities to learn by doing.
- Training uses a **variety of instructional techniques**, is **multi-sensory**, and addresses **diverse learning styles**.
- There are **strategies before, during, and after training** to increase knowledge/skills transfer to "back home" settings.
- During the initial planning phase, the organization identifies strategies to **evaluate training outcomes**.



E-LEARNING

Learning that is done over an electronic platform connected to a network (i.e. computer or other mobile device). Learners can participate simultaneously with an instructor (synchronously) or individually at their own preferred times (asynchronously). It includes media in the form of text, images, animation, and streaming video and audio.

BENEFITS

E-learning offers many benefits to organizations and learners, including **wide reach, flexible access, reusability, cost-effectiveness, reduced training time**, and **personalization**. For instance, people can access online courseware from widespread locations, and material can potentially be available twenty-four hours a day, 365

days a year, to be accessed at the best time and place for the learner. E-learning allows for repeated reuse to refresh learners' knowledge and skills. Organizations frequently cite an obvious benefit—the savings realized through reduced costs for travel, facilitation, food, and meeting rooms.

E-learning benefits include wide reach, flexible access, reusability, cost-effectiveness, reduced training time, and personalization

SELECTED BEST PRACTICES

- The organization conducts a **front-end analysis** to define desired outcomes and ensure relevance to learners' needs.
- Performance-based courses are built to **reflect the real performance environment of the learner**.
- Online courses **extend beyond the computer** to engage learners with their managers and peers in the workplace.
- Courseware **leverages multimedia** to engage participants and replicate real-world scenarios.
- Learners can **navigate freely** and **control the pace** at which they move through a course.
- During the initial planning phase, the organization identifies strategies to **evaluate training outcomes**.



BLENDED LEARNING

Learning that strategically and seamlessly combines multiple delivery methods to create the best possible learning solution for the target audience. In current usage, blended learning typically involves both formal and informal learning activities in both synchronous and asynchronous modalities.

BENEFITS

When well designed, blended learning can be a powerful strategy. It can address **a wide range of learning styles**, offer **flexibility** and **convenience** to a broad audience, and support a host of **informal learning processes**. For example, elements in a blended learning strategy could be any combination of live classroom, virtual classroom, e-learning, mentoring, job-shadowing, website material, narrated PowerPoint modules, simulations, job aids, collaboration tools, and books (hard copy and virtual), among other options. It's estimated that about 70 percent of workplace learning occurs informally through reading, discussions with co-workers, and trial and error efforts. Blended solutions go beyond formal training by making tools available for "just-in-time" learning. With a truly integrated set of learning methods, people can informally obtain the instruction that meets their individual or unique needs, while also participating in formal learning experiences.

SELECTED BEST PRACTICES

- The organization conducts a **front-end analysis** to define desired outcomes and ensure relevance to learners' needs.
- There is an initial **high-level vision** for the blended program, from start to finish.
- The **various learning modalities are truly integrated**; they are not merely a set of disjointed options, but instead, function in tandem to achieve the learning objectives.
- There is appropriate emphasis on **both synchronous and asynchronous** modalities.
- There is an **ongoing human connection**, even with self-directed learning options; facilitators are available by phone, email, chat, or in other ways to respond to questions and check-in with learners.
- There are **clearly communicated expectations** around learner's time investments, support required by managers, standards for completion, evaluation of learning, etc.
- Facilitators and learners know **how to successfully interact with all technology-driven learning methods** before a blended learning approach is rolled out.
- During the initial planning phase, the organization identifies strategies to **evaluate training outcomes**.

LEARNER READINESS

Whichever learning solutions an organization selects, it's important to consider **learner readiness**. High readiness means that learners understand and are prepared to engage in the pre-determined learning activities. While most learners are very familiar with live classroom training, they may be less familiar or comfortable with e-learning and blended solutions. Participants need to both see the value in these methods and feel confident as users. Here are some steps to increase learner readiness for these newer approaches:

1. Explain the **"What's in it for me?"** (WIIFM) to learners and their managers.
2. Release a **welcoming announcement** through your learning management system (LMS), or other communication means.
3. Provide the **big picture** (especially important for blended learning). Describe the learning path from beginning to end. Be clear about required vs. optional activities.
4. Hold a **"How to Learn" session** (live or virtual)
5. Make sure **learners know**:
 - a. How to access the system locally and remotely
 - b. Whom to call with questions
 - c. What hardware and software is available for their participation in online learning events
 - d. How to locate helpful online resource material
6. Provide **ready-to-use technical job aids** (e.g. instruction cards explaining logging on, entering a chat session, etc.)
7. If learners must work as a team over the course of a blended learning program, conduct a live classroom event at the outset.
8. Use **virtual meeting tools** to deliver pre-work, update information, and check-in with participants.

DECIDING WHICH LEARNING SOLUTION TO USE

There's no cut and dried approach to selecting the "best" solution. "Best practice" organizations develop an **overarching learning strategy that aligns with their organizational priorities and goals**. Then they select learning solutions for particular audiences and circumstance within the context of this long-term strategy. At a minimum, organizations need to:

1. Identify **learning outcomes**. Determine the gaps between the target population's current knowledge/skills and what is (or will be) required for on-the-job performance. Establish learning objectives that bridge the gap.
2. Be clear on **what types** of learning outcomes are required. Are they knowledge-based, skills-based, or both?
3. Know the **target audience**. Use learning solutions that match people's learning preferences and work conditions.
4. Determine whether the **organization's current environment** will support the learning solution under consideration. For instance, is there cultural and learner readiness for this approach? Is there adequate internal sponsorship? Is the appropriate technology available? What groundwork needs to be laid before implementing a particular learning solution?

Beyond these generic considerations, there are other factors to consider when deciding between classroom learning, e-learning, or a blended approach. The table below offers some broad selection guidelines.

Consider LIVE CLASSROOM when... 	Consider E-LEARNING when... 	Consider BLENDED LEARNING when... 
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The topic is highly complex or programmatic ▪ The content is divisive or emotionally charged ▪ Networking, team-building, or culture-building are desired outcomes ▪ Learners want in-person access to peers and experts ▪ Skill retention requires extensive in-person practice ▪ Expert observation of skills is required ▪ Comprehension requires group interaction around subjective topics ▪ Teams will be using the knowledge/skills to work together on a specific project 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Basic concepts, policies, and procedures must be rapidly distributed to dispersed groups ▪ Job roles require rapid acquisition of new knowledge or skills ▪ Learners will benefit from self-direction and control over learning schedule and pace ▪ Learners' jobs preclude long absences from work ▪ Knowledge acquisition must precede live application ▪ Skills practice doesn't require an in-person format ▪ Learners need multi-use access to refresh knowledge or skills ▪ Methods exist to maintain and update content 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Learners are geographically dispersed, have diverse learning styles, and require convenience, flexibility, and choice ▪ The organization's learning strategy involves supporting people's informal, in-the-moment learning opportunities during the work day ▪ Learning objectives can be best achieved by a mix of synchronous and asynchronous learning solutions ▪ A combination of factors from the first two columns applies

WEB 2.0 TECHNOLOGIES

With the advent of Web 2.0 technologies, sometimes called the “two-way web,” learners can access content on their own terms and also provide content of their own. Many of these tools can be leveraged to maximize learner-to-learner interaction. These technologies include tools such as:

- **Blog:** a tool containing a person's commentaries or news on a particular subject. Readers can leave comments interactively or rate the blogger's entries.
- **Wiki:** a tool that allows different authors to collaborate on an online document, thereby capturing ideas and information from various people. Users can add, delete, and edit content on the site.
- **Podcast/vodcast:** a web-based broadcast delivered on demand to subscribers through the use of RSS (Really Simple Syndication). Podcasts disseminate audio content (such as presentations, information updates, and interviews). Vodcasts disseminate on-demand video content (such as a news program), also through subscription.
- **Online social networking:** technology that allows people to find and connect with individuals who may or may not be within their immediate network. Relationships can be created based on shared interests or projects.

According to ASTD's *2009 State of the Industry Report*, only about 8.7 percent of private and public sector organizations are using these technologies for educational purposes. Clearly the potential of these up-and-coming technologies has not been realized yet, but many industry experts predict that they will have a growing impact within the next few years.

SUMMARY

Learning solutions that are part of a longer-term learning strategy have greater potential for organizational impact. **Real learning and lasting behavior change** do not occur through one-time training events, whether instructor-led or self-paced, live classroom, or technology-enabled. Best practice organizations align learning with organizational goals and learners' competency needs. They **link learning to performance**, while **managing costs** and **maximizing value**.

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