



The New Blended Learning

Leading Learning Podcast Transcript for Episode 332

Celisa Steele: [00:00:00] So that's the STEP framework. And, as you've gathered, by adjusting and shifting how you approach one or more of these four dimensions—sequence, timing, emphasis and personalization—you can design and develop really radically different blended learning offerings.

Celisa Steele: [00:00:23] I'm Celisa Steele.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:24] I'm Jeff Cobb, and this is the Leading Learning Podcast.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:33] Welcome to episode 332 of the Leading Learning Podcast, where we're talking about blended learning.

Celisa Steele: [00:00:39] And blended learning is one of those terms that almost demands to be defined because it isn't used to mean the same thing by all people. So we'll start off with our definition of blended learning.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:52] And we say it's our definition, but it draws heavily on the definition offered by the Christensen Institute and its Blended Learning Universe. And we mention them to give credit where credit is due and because they can be good resources as your learning business explores blended learning. Their work is geared to the K-12 world, but there's still resources and ideas that a learning business could learn from and apply in the realm of continuing education, professional development, and lifelong learning.

Celisa Steele: [00:01:21] Definitely. And so now, without further ado or further disclaimers, here's our definition. For us, blended learning is a formal education program which meets three criteria. One, students learn in part through online learning with some element of student control over time, place, path, and/or pace. Two, students learn in part in a brick-and-mortar location where instruction is facilitated. And, third, the online and offline modalities are connected to provide an integrated learning experience.

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Jeff Cobb: [00:01:59] And I will say right off that we have gotten pushback on this definition. Obviously, we're very focused on the online versus offline, or face-to-face, distinction. But we know, both from things we've read over time and also from feedback that we got from a recent Webinar, that's not necessarily how everybody sees blended learning. For a lot of people, I think it's really the blending of synchronous and asynchronous elements. So they might consider live online learning with on-demand, online learning, putting those two together, to be a form of blending. But obviously that's not how we're talking about it.

Celisa Steele: [00:02:34] Yeah, and I think that in some ways it is helpful to have a definition, even if we don't necessarily all agree on the definition. But if we're too broad in how we define blended learning, then I think it becomes somewhat unhelpful. At the extreme end, that means really all learning could be described as blended because if you're involving different types of activities and maybe there's some homework, so that's something the students doing on their own, but it can become too diffuse, so it's therefore then unhelpful to really be able to talk about this as an approach to learning—blended learning.

Jeff Cobb: [00:03:08] Yeah. And I feel, in terms of putting asynchronous and synchronous online together, my perspective on that, which I know maybe doesn't sit well with some people, is just simply that that's good learning. That's good e-learning. And you're taking advantage of the fact that you now can do live e-learning effectively. You now can do on-demand e-learning effectively. If you're really designing learning experiences to be effective and what you're trying to achieve is going to benefit from putting those two things together, great. That's just good learning. I don't necessarily consider that to be "blended learning."

Celisa Steele: [00:03:43] There's actually a definition that EDUCAUSE has put out for this term: "bichronous online learning." And, to be honest, I'm not totally sure if it's "by-chronous" or "bick-ronous" online learning, but it's this idea of when you do mix asynchronous and synchronous online learning into the same program. Now, I don't know anybody who's actually really embracing that term and labeling their offerings as "bichronous online learning," but it does exist as a potential term. And so, again, for us, it really is just about having that line in the sand in terms of when we say "blended learning," what do we mean? And for us it really is this combination of online learning—again, to go back to that definition—where the student has some control over pace or timing of when they do it. And then there's the facilitated in-person component as well.

Jeff Cobb: [00:04:33] I'm just looking forward to fitting the word *bichronous* into any conversations that I have in the coming days and weeks just to surprise people with that

term. But, really, when it comes down to it, obviously Zoom and Webinars have taken over our worlds. We're very into the synchronous, the live, online learning now and on-demand online learning. But, if you go back to the origins of blended learning, back in the old days when we were just getting started in the world of e-learning, it clearly was the online/offline distinction that was at the heart of it. And that gets back to where the Christiansen Institute is coming from.

Celisa Steele: [00:05:03] And then, of course, the other reason that we think the online/offline, the blending of those two components, is particularly important right now is the fact that we are emerging from COVID. And in this world where we had to almost entirely rely on online learning for a period of months to up to years in some cases, and now we're back in a place where gathering together in person again seems reasonable, seems relatively safe. And so I think there is this new question of why and when do we choose to gather in person versus why and when do we choose to learn online.

Jeff Cobb: [00:05:45] Right. So, in terms of why to focus on blended learning right now, there are two reasons. And, of course, that first one is that big-picture reason that we're in this post-COVID/emerging-from-COVID world, and learners and learning businesses are looking for that good balance between in-person and online.

Celisa Steele: [00:06:03] And if we take this question of why focus on blended learning now to mean in this particular episode, it's driven by that big-picture reason, but it's also specific to us here at Leading Learning. Because we see the importance of blended learning in this moment in history, we decided to put out an executive briefing on the topic of blended learning, and we wanted to make sure that listeners know about this resource. So you can download the briefing by going to leadinglearning.com/blended.

Jeff Cobb: [00:06:33] And the briefing really is one of the free benefits of being a subscriber to Leading Learning, to following us. We put out these briefings periodically where we try to dig into topics that are really timely, as blended learning is right now. And, if you're looking for examples of how other organizations are doing blended learning, we've got several of those in the briefing, really detailing what other organizations are doing and where they're having success, how they're thinking about it, how they are rethinking it, maybe, given the context that they're in right now. If you need those examples, if you need to educate others in your organization about blended learning, if you need some data, some anecdotal evidence to bring forward for budgeting purposes, or if you just need a good framework for how to actually implement blended learning effectively, we go through a framework that we've laid out in the

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report, so it's pretty all-around, chock-full of value. And all you've got to do is go download it. It's right there for you to get.

Celisa Steele: [00:07:30] That's right. So we're going to come back to that framework that you alluded to there, Jeff, just a little bit later in this show. But, for now, your key takeaway is to be sure to go to [leadinglearning.com/blended](https://www.leadinglearning.com/blended) to get the executive briefing on blended learning.

Jeff Cobb: [00:07:48] At Tagoras, we're experts in the global business of lifelong learning, and we use our expertise to help clients better understand their markets, connect with new customers, make the right investment decisions, and grow their learning businesses. We achieve these goals through expert market assessment, strategy formulation, and platform selection services. If you're looking for a partner to help your learning business achieve greater reach, revenue, and impact, learn more at [tagoras.com/services](https://www.tagoras.com/services).

Celisa Steele: [00:08:20] We started the show by defining "blended learning" as we use it. I'm going to also raise the term "hybrid learning." I'm going to mention that in part by pointing out what blended learning isn't, at least for us. For us, hybrid learning refers to an educational approach in which some individuals participate online, and other individuals participate in person, and that's usually according to learner choice. So that individual gets to choose I'm going to participate online, or I'm going to show up in person. And then you have instructors or facilitators who are teaching those online and in-person learners at the same time using technology like video conferencing.

Jeff Cobb: [00:09:04] You can contrast this with blended learning, where all learners complete some components in person, and all learners participate in other components online. And the designers of the program decide when learners are to learn via in-person instruction and when via online learning activities, according to a prescribed sequence of events.

Celisa Steele: [00:09:26] Both hybrid learning and blended learning involve a mix of in-person and online learning, but how the mix is used differs in the two scenarios. Now, for us, what this all means is that you and your team need to have shared definitions. If you're going to talk about blended learning or you're going to talk about hybrid learning or any other approach, you need to take time to unpack what that term means and make sure that you and your team are actually talking about the same thing.

Jeff Cobb: [00:09:55] And it's definitely understandable why hybrid learning, or at least the idea of hybrid learning, is very attractive in our post-COVID world, and we expect we're going to

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see both more of hybrid and more of blended. Hybrid, of course, when you've got these audiences where you want to be able to serve them both at the same time, that sounds attractive. But, in our book, hybrid really is harder to pull off because of the need to serve those multiple audiences at the same time. And we think blended learning is really more likely to be successful in most cases than hybrid is.

Celisa Steele: [00:10:29] Right—and successful in the sense of the learning outcomes and the learning effectiveness. And, if you take our definition of hybrid, where you have the online and in-person learners engaging simultaneously, at the same time, then that's very hard to pull off. It tends to lead towards you are going to end up prioritizing one audience's needs over the other. So you're either going to focus on the in-person people and ignore the online attendees and treat them almost as lurkers. Or vice-versa. But there is the chance, in our book anyway, to get hybrid to potentially work if you unpack it and actually take the same content and use it for both online and offline learning, but you do it so that you're serving in-person learners at one time and offline learners at another. And so you're using the same resources, but you're not trying to serve them both at the same time, which is just incredibly hard to pull off.

Jeff Cobb: [00:11:32] Definitely. So, having defined what we mean by blended learning, having talked about how it's different from hybrid learning, and having looked at why it's particularly resonant at this point in time, let's take a turn to the practical.

Celisa Steele: [00:11:47] Even within our somewhat narrow definition of blended learning, meaning it has to include online and in-person components, there are still many approaches to blended learning. And so, when you're designing a blended learning experience, it can be really helpful to consider four dimensions: sequence, timing, emphasis, and personalization. And we remember these four dimensions using a STEP acronym.

Jeff Cobb: [00:12:15] When developing blended learning, you have to make choices about the sequence of components. A simple blended approach that we call a front flip has learners complete an online component before showing up for further in-person learning. And this is a very popular model, especially with hard skills training. If a hands-on component happens in person, completing foundational content, such as a lab safety module online, doing that first can help make the time together more efficient and effective and even safer.

Celisa Steele: [00:12:47] Another simple approach to sequencing is a back flip. Learners gather in person first to kick off a blended experience, and then you follow up that in-person gathering with online content. This approach could work well with softer skills. Coming together in

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person at the beginning of, say, a leadership-focused offering might allow learners to get to know one another. And then, because they have gotten to know one another, they feel more familiar with one another, then they might be more comfortable sharing their true concerns and true issues in subsequent online meetings or a discussion forum that's part of this leadership offering.

Jeff Cobb: [00:13:28] Of course, a learning business can combine front flips and back flips to create more complex combinations of blended learning. You might start online with an orientation, gather in person, and then follow up online with additional content and guidelines for student projects, gather in person again for learners to present projects, and then wrap up with additional resources online. The sequencing possibilities are essentially endless, so making the sequence clear is really important.

Celisa Steele: [00:13:57] I do think that that can be a pitfall of blended learning, especially when you get into combining the front flips and back flips, is just really helping the learner understand where they are in the process and what they should be doing at what point, whether that's something online or something in person. You just want to make that crystal clear. So that's the S of STEP, sequencing. And next is timing. And by timing we mean the overall length of the experience. Is this going to be a year-long class, or is it going to be an experience that's just a few weeks in duration? And then timing also refers to the elapsed time between components. If it's going to be a year-long experience, how often are you providing content to your learners? Is that going to be something that they need to do every day, every week, something every month? You want to look at both the overall length and then the time between whatever components make up the experience.

Jeff Cobb: [00:14:55] And learning science has proven the positive benefits of spacing, which suggests the importance of having some time pass between components. But the benefits of spacing will need to be balanced with the reality of learners' availability and what a learning business might be able to charge for an offering. So balancing these timing considerations will give you your cadence.

Celisa Steele: [00:15:17] So that's the T, timing. And next is E, emphasis. To go back to our definition of blended learning, it involves both face-to-face components and online components, but different experiences will place a different emphasis on those two modes.

Jeff Cobb: [00:15:35] For some, the online component might be the backbone of the experience. The majority of the content, skills, or knowledge are taught online, and then the in-person

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component is icing on the cake, a chance to discuss or explore application without introducing new content, skills, or knowledge. And then for other experiences, the in-person component might be the backbone with the online component supporting or reinforcing key concepts over time and allowing for retrieval practice (another learning science-backed tactic to support learning).

Celisa Steele: [00:16:08] And then, of course, some experiences will place a more equal weight on the online and in-person instruction, where learners are getting essential content and practice opportunities through both the online and in-person components.

Jeff Cobb: [00:16:23] So that's E, emphasis. And that brings us to P, personalization. At the core of personalization is the idea that different learners bring different prior knowledge and experience to any learning experience, and so they typically benefit from some level of customization that acknowledges their differences.

Celisa Steele: [00:16:43] When designing blended learning, you'll have choices to make about whether all or only some components are required and whether to build some components in a way that can help you personalize the experience. Because blended learning involves multiple components, by definition, it offers the potential for learners to skip ones that aren't relevant to their work or life or ones where they are already fluent with the content and the skills that are being taught.

Jeff Cobb: [00:17:12] You might also provide alternative versions of certain components. There might be a remedial module on a topic for learners who are brand-new to the field or profession and a more advanced treatment of the topic for more seasoned professionals in the field. And you might also use technology to help learners identify which components are most relevant to them. You could develop a pre-assessment based on their specific performance. Learners could be recommended specific components. Maybe they don't need to take all of them because they've tested out of some, or the assessment might help them know where they need the remedial or more advanced version of a topic.

Celisa Steele: [00:17:49] A different aspect of personalization has to do with the intimacy of the experience. When you're designing a blended learning offering, you have choices to make about the number of learners who will be allowed to participate and about the number of facilitators that will be involved. And those numbers will impact how much interaction there can be among learners and facilitators. So you need to keep in mind the potential appeal and benefits of playing with those numbers. Some learners are going to be drawn to blended learning's

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promise to give them access to other learners. If that group of learners is huge, it could actually be difficult for a learner to connect with others and feel like she's a meaningful part of that group. If the group is smaller, it might be easier to get to know one another and create an environment in which learners are willing to be open and authentic with one another. But, of course, if you go too small, then learners may not be able to find others where they feel like their issues are the same as other learners. So there's a lot of choice there that you'll have to tease out given your audience and the topic that you are teaching.

Jeff Cobb: [00:19:01] And then the size of the cohort also impacts how much attention each individual learner can expect from a facilitator. Involving multiple facilitators can allow more one-on-one attention for learners, but it can also fracture the group. In single-facilitator situations, that facilitator can unify the experience by her recurring presence and knowledge of each learner. And, if that facilitator is well respected or well known, having access to the facilitator may drive learners to participate in a blended learning experience where they know they'll be able to interact with her over time and, through that engagement with the facilitator and with each other, really make the experience their own.

Celisa Steele: [00:19:43] So that's the STEP framework. And, as you've gathered, by adjusting and shifting how you approach one or more of these four dimensions—sequence, timing, emphasis and personalization—you can design and develop really radically different blended learning offerings.

Jeff Cobb: [00:20:02] You really can go in a lot of different directions with blended learning. It's one of the things that I really like about it. It is so malleable. You can create these experiences that we know, just because of the learning science involved, are going to be retained better, are going to be more effective, more impactful. I think they provide great opportunities for the instructors and the facilitators to really hit their stride and stretch themselves in working with students. And they also provide those opportunities for the students to really shape the experience because you're not just in on-demand. You're not just in the facilitated face-to-face component. You get to pick and choose between those and how you're going to engage with each of them to really mold the experience to your needs as a learner. And I think that reflects on that personalization and customization aspect that blended learning makes possible. But, when it comes down to it, whatever you do, of course you're going to want to test and validate and refine. And that's going to apply to both the face-to-face component and the online component. But do your work in doing that, and you can create some very powerful learning experiences with blended learning.

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Celisa Steele: [00:21:20] So that's our look at blended learning. Be sure to download our blended learning briefing. You can do that by visiting leadinglearning.com/blended. That's our top takeaway from this episode—go download that briefing at leadinglearning.com/blended.

Jeff Cobb: [00:21:36] At the show notes for this episode at leadinglearning.com/episode332, you'll see options for subscribing to the podcast, and, if you haven't yet, please do subscribe. Those subscription numbers give us some insights into what impact the podcast is having.

Celisa Steele: [00:21:52] We'd be grateful if you would take a minute to rate us on Apple Podcasts or wherever you listen, especially if you enjoy the show. Jeff and I personally appreciate reviews and ratings, and they help the podcast show up when people search for content on leading a learning business.

Jeff Cobb: [00:22:07] Lastly, please spread the word about Leading Learning. In the show notes at leadinglearning.com/episode332, you'll find links to connect with us on Twitter, LinkedIn, and Facebook.

Celisa Steele: [00:22:18] Thanks again, and see you next time on the Leading Learning Podcast.

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