

Use of Blended Learning in Executive Education: The Voice of the Learner

Prepared for UNICON

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Executive Summary

Corporate learning officers have begun to use online learning more regularly in leadership development programs. As a result, blended programs are now common in most corporate academies. Yet, studies on the effectiveness of leadership development programs that follow a blended model have been limited. In particular, the “voice of the learner,” i.e., the individual who participates in the learning experience, has not been researched to date.

The lack of a deep understanding of the opinions of learners who take part in blended programs is a potential blind spot for executive education program designers. Indeed, without the voice of the learner, program designers cannot know which tools are most effective for creating impactful blended executive learning experiences. This understanding is particularly important in times when technology is transforming education generally, and executive development specifically; executive learners’ opinions are an essential guide to executive education providers’ strategic planning efforts.

This study fills this void of customer insight. Data from interviews with 21 individuals across 14 industries were mined to develop a better understanding of the executive learners’ views on their blended learning experiences. Three findings emerged.

First, there seems to be an increase in the use of blended learning in executive development. Second, executive learners seem to find the blended learning experiences they take part in meaningful. Finally, although there has been much progress, there appear to be many opportunities for further improving the design of blended programs, in particular with respect to the use of technology. The data from the interviews helps shed light on these findings.

Programs reviewed ranged from open enrolment courses by business schools or other providers, to in-house custom programs that were company-specific or designed for a consortium. From the 21 interviews conducted, three main types/designs of program were identified. Across the types/designs, there was little variation. The programs described by participants were similar in their approach; i.e. the learning methodologies used. What variation did exist had to do mostly with the number of modules, and their location.

Interviewees openly shared their beliefs about different aspects of their learning experiences. Some reflections were related to the observable learning methodologies, or elements, used in a program. Others had to do with the overall learning experience they engaged in. Both provide interesting clues for improving blended learning design.

Six elements (i.e. methodologies) emerged from the analysis of the learners’ collective program experiences; these elements were those *explicitly* referred to by participants in their interviews, and with respect to which they provided feedback.

1. **Coaching & Mentoring** - The most prolific element observed across the programs was Coaching & Mentoring (C&M). Either coaching or mentoring was used in some form in every program described, although coaching was most preferred by program designers. Two main types of C&M were observed, individual and cluster. Each of the coaching processes began with some form of assessment, either 360 degree feedback or psychometric tests. C&M was positively received by most participants. The matching process proved to be the most important aspect of ensuring a positive experience for the learners. Opportunities for improving the matching process were identified by many.

2. **Projects** - Projects featured as the action learning element of choice to apply the insights obtained in the programs. Projects ranged from personal development through to organizational growth. Participants reported project selection and support as the two most important drivers of success with the projects. Many individuals mentioned the demanding nature of the projects, but when asked about the role in their learning experience most indicated the projects were definitely “worth it” and should be kept in.
3. **Individual Assignments** - Program designers frequently used individual assignments to help participants apply insights and hence develop their leadership skills. Interviewees reported the use of individual development action plans as the most common means of helping them chart their actions to grow as a leader. As part of this, they appreciated formal journals and workbooks with writing prompts to support application of concepts back in their work. Interviewees also reported on a different use of individual assignments, and that is to help equalize the level of knowledge across program participants of a specific topic - such as finance or other.
4. **Content Sessions** - Content sessions were the most typical means of introducing new content to cohorts. Most reported to enjoy the sessions as long as they met certain criteria, such as energetic style, varied design and short in length. Interviewees preferred lectures given by more than one person, that were exciting, dynamic and provocative. Participants also enjoyed sessions with breakout groups that made room for peer exchange and reflection. However, report-outs from breakout groups were viewed as less useful. Finally, length was an important factor in keeping participants’ attention, in-person as well as online. In fact, online sessions in some programs were adjusted down to a maximum of 90 minutes based on participant feedback post-launch.
5. **Networking** - Despite the tendency of most programs to “pack in as much as possible”, participants reported a strong desire to meet, learn from and get to know like-minded peers. Most program designs included interactive dinners and some entertainment. However, networking activities were predominantly limited to in-person modules. Participants identified several opportunities to improve networking both before and after programs. Also, participants expressed a desire for more support in building relationships with peers. However, they were mixed in their belief that social networking tools in their current form would improve networking opportunities.
6. **Follow-up** - Post-program support, otherwise known as follow-up, was broadly unmentioned by participants. Most program designs included the idea, but left the activity up to the participants. For those programs that did incorporate follow-up, activities ranged from “outreach” for staying connected to “booster shot” videos for continued exposure to content to reconvening peer-support groups. Company-specific programs made follow-up easier, as it was an activity sanctioned by the organization. Participants who were exposed to follow-up reacted positively, with supported peer-learning groups receiving the best feedback.

In addition to comments about program elements, participants also provided more general impressions about their learning experience. The analysis of this data revealed five themes, or beliefs, *implicitly* held by the collective group of interviewees.

1. **Searching for Meaning** - Program participation required extra effort and work. While interviewees were willing to invest in the learning experience, they craved an understanding of why they were selected, who they were learning with and what their participation would do for them. Information provided at the beginning of most programs was insufficient, and less timely than needed. Participants noted that potential changes in

the type and timing of pre-program content would have improved their motivation, their understanding of the context and their ability to connect with peers throughout their learning experience.

2. **Desire to Learn More than Just Business** - Individuals valued experiencing a learning journey that went beyond simply extending their business knowledge. This broader goal was made possible thanks to the interrelationships between the individuals in the group as well as each individual and their organisation. By exploring these interrelationships through different learning experiences, individuals connected with a wider range of learning outcomes than expected. The more contextualized the content and the more supported the connections, the more participants found their own means of extracting value for themselves and their organizations.
3. **Preference for Designs that are Fit for Purpose** - Learners wanted the methodology and mode design choices to match the most efficient and effective outcome. Interviewees recognized and appreciated the clever selection of the right method and mode for the right outcome. Learner opinions also provided inspiration for new applications that move beyond the commonly known uses of these new tools and that could be used to improve blended experiences.
4. **Learning a New Way to Learn** - There appeared to be a need to “educate” learners in the blended learning process, and its tools. In many cases, it was important to include activities that help individuals address the challenges of adopting new learning practices, to help them build new learning habits. In many ways, participants needed to relearn how to learn; i.e. some training on the process, the tools and how to get the most out of their investment, if they were to improve their learning skill.
5. **Making it Easy to Experience the Learning** - Interviewees described their experiences as “well thought out”, but identified opportunities to reduce effort required to get the most out of their program. Participants’ observations clustered around the ways participants accessed and applied their learning. Reducing the extra effort required to simply experience the learning was critical to avoid cognitive overload and remove barriers to learning. Given the pressures and time constraints individual participants have, anything that made the process “plug and play” seemed to be valued by most, if not all, participants. Interestingly, opportunities for improvement included both modes of blended design, face-to-face and online.

It is our hope that the combination of these two perspectives, *explicit* and *implicit* beliefs of blended experiences, may provide insights for improvements to executive education designers who strive to create learning experiences that make a meaningful impact for those taking part.

Use of Blended Learning in Executive Education: The Voice of the Learner

Background

Online learning, also referred to as e-learning, distance learning, and distributed learning (terms used interchangeably in practice), originated in the early 1960s. At that time the term was utilized to describe experiments using computer-based training programs at the University of Illinois and Stanford. Since then, and particularly with the introduction of the personal computer and the Internet in the late 20th century, online learning tools have expanded exponentially.

The growth in online learning has occurred most significantly in K-12 and postsecondary educational settings, where a wealth of online learning opportunities is now available. Recent research in these contexts suggests online learning can be at least as effective as face-to-face learning (US Department of Education, 2010). Furthermore, there is strong support for blended learning applications (i.e., the combination of face-to-face and online learning), as studies suggest they are more effective than either face-to-face or online learning independently (US Department of Education, 2010).

Despite online learning's success in K-12 and postsecondary education, it was not until the start of the current century that it took off in the corporate world. Online learning was then used by businesses primarily for basic skills training or knowledge dissemination. Today this need is still a significant driver of its use, but other uses of online learning are growing increasingly popular.

More recently, corporate learning officers have begun to use online learning in leadership development programs, largely in blended program designs. Blended learning was first discussed in a leadership development context in books written in the mid-2000's (Bersin, 2004; van Dam, 2004). Its adoption has risen in recent years, thanks, amongst other things, to the MOOC (massive open online courses) hype. Blended programs are now common in most corporate academies.

Yet, studies on the effectiveness of leadership development programs that follow a blended model are limited. Furthermore, the data that are available usually describe the program designer's views or opinions. Program designers typically include executives leading a program such as the Chief Human Resources Officer or Chief Learning Officer, or an executive education provider such as business schools or boutique leadership development firms. These stakeholders set priorities for a program, not only in terms of its learning objectives, but also the implied content, methodologies, and delivery modes.

Program designers are "providers", not participants or "consumers", of learning experiences. The "voice of the learner," the individual who participates in the learning experience, had not been researched. No study has examined the opinions of executive learners across programs, seeking their thoughts on program design, e.g., which mode is most suited to their needs or which methodologies have the greatest impact. . As technology transforms education generally and executive development specifically, enabling new solutions, it is clear that these

opinions are an increasingly important guide for executive education providers' strategic planning efforts. How might they impact program design decisions?

This study fills the customer insights void. Through in-depth interviews with executives who have participated in blended learning experiences, it accomplishes two objectives. First, it describes executives' beliefs about different learning approaches in blended programs. And second, it identifies program design improvement opportunities by mapping executive learners' preferences to solutions that are feasible given the tools available today. It is our hope that the combination of these two elements, participants' beliefs and improvement opportunities, will provide insights to learning design providers striving to create impactful blended programs for leadership development in organizations.

Research Project Overview

The goal of this study was to understand learner's perspectives of *formal leadership development programs for executives designed using a blended learning model*.

We gathered contacts from UNICON members. 75 executives were identified, all of whom have taken a blended learning programme in the last few years. Of these 75 executives, 67 were approached, from 14 sectors.

Participating executives were hand-selected because of their role as *senior managers* who had recently participated in a *leadership development program* that was designed according to a *blended learning* model. For avoidance of doubt, the following definitions are assumed in this study:

Leadership development: the formal and informal learning curriculum used in leadership development experiences, ranging from stretch assignments to executive coaching to action learning.

Blended learning: learning experiences involving "the combination of two historically separate models of teaching and learning: traditional face-to-face learning systems and distributed learning systems (Graham, 2006)." i.e., it must mix two modes of interaction, classroom-based and virtual, regardless of what type of interaction was taking place in each mode.

Executives: upper-level line with general management responsibilities or a high-level head of function such as a chief financial officer or vice-president of administration.

A literature review was conducted to develop the conceptual framework for the study, and the research questions. The research questions were converted into a set of interview questions aimed at exploring the research topic. Interviewees shared beliefs regarding their blended learning experience through highly personalized and richly detailed stories about a blended program(s) they have attended.

Prior to the first "real" interviews, a few preliminary interviews were conducted to test the efficacy of the interview protocol. Following slight revisions based on information uncovered in the preliminary interviews, study interviews with executives from the US and Europe were conducted by phone or on Skype. All interviews were recorded.

Although 34 executives said they would be interested in discussing their experience, only 21 were able to share their experiences within the research timeframe. All interviews were

transcribed and coded by thematic ideas that emerged from the interview passages. Codes were generated both inductively and deductively, allowing themes to emerge from a discrete program context as well as patterns across respondents.

A team of three researchers was involved in the project. Two researchers conducted the interviews between March and June 2016; one compiled and analyzed the data from June to August 2016. All three interpreted the data and contributed to writing this report. Each of the three researchers has deep experience in the education sector and informed insights to generate this report. Finally, based on the findings and their personal experiences, each researcher contributed an informed perspective on the implications of the data. These perspectives were withheld until the end of the report to ensure objectivity, and are presented as the report’s final chapter.

Blended Learning Programs Overview

Programs reviewed ranged from open enrolment courses to custom programs. They included courses offered by business schools and other providers - amongst which corporate academies. Additionally, at least two participants mentioned a consortium model.

Of the 21 interviews conducted, 14 discrete programs appeared (this is due to the fact that some interviewees had attended the same program). Of the 14 discrete programs, three main designs (types) were identified.

Three Main Program Designs and their Elements

Despite the worry over technological disruption and an increase in the frequency of blended programs in executive education, programs discussed with participants remained fairly traditional in their structure and consistent in their approach. None of the programs appeared “innovative” in their basic construct, with exception of the *location* of the learning module. In this case, the most innovative uses of location were virtual and “in-market” (i.e. learning processes with significant interaction with the local context).

At the highest level, each program contained a consistent set of elements delivered over time in various combinations, either in-person or virtually. Figure 1 below lists these elements, which include: individual application (reading, studying, etc.), classes (lectures, discussions, simulations), working meetings, projects, coaching, follow-up, tools and some form of evaluation.

Program Elements	In Person	Virtually
Individual application	-----	-----
Classes (Incl: simulations, discussions)		
Working meetings		
Project work		
Coaching		
Follow-up		

Figure 1

The programs ranged from 3.5 months to one year in duration¹. During this time, programs used either three or four phases to create the respective learning journeys. Figures 2 – 4 illustrate the different learning journeys; i.e. how the elements are combined. Various combinations led to three primary designs that emerged from the data.

The simplest design, represented by Figure 2 below, described a Simple program comprised of three phases: pre-program, program and post-program.

Program Type 1: Simple

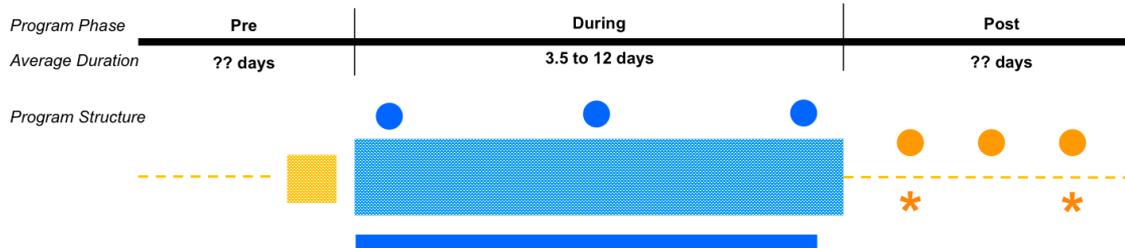


Figure 2

More complex program designs incorporated inter-modular breaks to extend the learning experience. In these increasingly involved programs, face-to-face classes anchored the modular learning experience - as indicated in Figure 3 below, describing a *Modular* type program.

Program Type 2: Modular

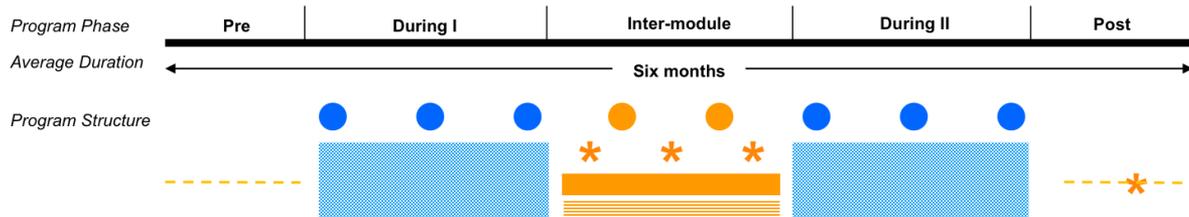


Figure 3

The third type of program, *Complex*, conducted classes (learning modules) virtually to extend and/or expand the learning experience as illustrated in Figure 4 below.

¹ Actual pre- and post- program days were not reported by the participants. We assumed the programs followed a typical executive education practice of giving participants 2-4 weeks of preparation time and 4-8 weeks follow-up time, thereby increasing class time by 6-12 weeks.

Program Type 3: Complex

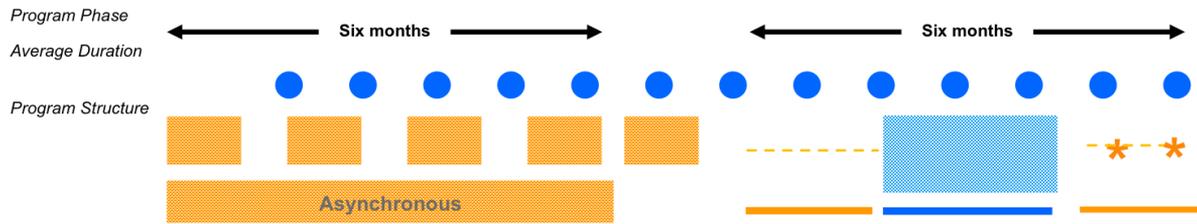


Figure 4

Most “non-traditional” programs followed the third type of program structure, i.e. *Complex*, and varied the “location” of classes. In some cases this variation was achieved by changing the geographic location of face-to-face modules; for example, delivering modules in China or India. In others, the variation was obtained by including virtual modules.

In one case, an organization conducted a *Complex* program with a combination of virtual and geographic rotations, by using a virtual connected classroom in hub cities/offices. Despite the organization’s technological investment, according to the neutral description made by the interviewee, the virtual classroom did not seem to detract from or add to participants’ learning experience.

In India [Bangalore] we have a facility where they have these connected classroom sessions, so some people had to fly down from the other states of the country, but that was more like us being able to see them in a video conference. It was the same effect as being in a classroom with them.

As stated by the participant, the impact in some cases centered more on easing logistics and effort, than improving learning. However, given the increasing importance of work/life balance, this itself might be considered a positive result. Additionally, this use of technology also provided greater flexibility, which in many cases made attendance possible for some participants.

I wanted to have the experience of being on campus and having the interactions, but I was not able to at the time—because of my project and day-to-day activities. The program is structured in a way You can easily do work when you’re based at home and then have the interaction and experience.

Cohorts ranged in size from 25 to 170 participants. Cohort mix was used both to enhance as well as structure the learning experiences. All programs tried to “balance the [cohorts] as much as possible” in addition to managing the distribution of subgroup participants to ensure a mix of learning perspectives. Some organizations even used “a diversity server” to set up groups according to ethnic, national and gender mix. Regardless of the experience, positive or negative, all participants referenced the importance of group dynamics to their learning experience.

Group dynamics are massively important. You can get lucky. I think there should be better planning from the company and the business school on how you set the dynamic of those groups. I was in the very boisterous, testosterone-driven male group, and I wanted to be more reflective and go deeper. But their attention span was shorter.

Small groups of 4-5 were used throughout the programs. Small group activities were conducted both online and in face-to-face sessions. The structuring of small group processes, however, received mixed feedback. Some participants felt work in small groups had most impact

when the participants had met each other face-to-face, prior to the “virtual” small group work. Other participants felt the reverse was true.

For those participants who valued meeting first, they found “it difficult to go beyond a certain point of challenge or comment” before they had met their peers. In that sense, the face-to-face meeting served as an icebreaker for the group dynamic. On the other hand, some felt that “it was really good to meet them [after working online], then you’re expanding that relationship face-to-face rather than growing it from scratch.”

In addition to distance, technology also supported challenges associated with language and accents. “About 50% of [those in] the course did not have English as their first language.” Remote learning proved difficult for some “when trying to understand the accent over the phone”, but the technology allowed “typing questions, so people could either pre-submit questions or type them in ... to be answered.” “This seemed to get more use from the non-English speakers than the English ones.”

Tracking or assessment were used sparingly, and found in virtual more than face-to-face experiences. Some programs merely tracked completion “in the Learning Management System”. Other programs started “with some information through a video or scenario and then confirm[ed] through questioning” or “quizzes to test ...knowledge at the end of the key chapters.”

Counter intuitively, tracking was more prevalent in synchronous than asynchronous virtual sessions. One organization monitored individuals’ engagement on their screens when attending a virtual session. If they were doing something else, “people used to get emails saying that they had only done 80% of the training.” If they had not completed 100% of the training, they had to go back and review the recording.

In summary, three main program designs were identified. These designs resulted from reconfiguration of a common set of design elements. All designs used cohorts and small groups as critical tools in creating the learning experience. Each of the three program types, simple, modular and complex, leveraged technology to a varying degree.

With respect to technology, the data suggested technology was used most commonly to support a program's various learning elements. A great example of the use of technology as an enabler was described in the use of web-conferencing to enable virtual collaboration for small group work. There was little evidence of the use of technology to creatively address unmet needs, or to meet old needs in new ways.

A Deeper Look into the Learning Experiences

The data was analyzed using two different lenses. First, learners’ reactions to *individual design elements* (i.e. methodologies) were used to identify *explicit* beliefs about the design components used in interviewees’ blended learning experiences. Second, learners’ reactions to their *overall learning experience* provided insights into their *implicit* beliefs regarding their needs for blended learning experiences. The following two sections discuss these two perspectives in detail.

Participant Reactions to Individual Learning Design Elements - *Explicit Beliefs*

Although programs used many elements in their designs, six main learning elements (i.e. methodologies) appeared in each of the program designs described by the interviewees. Except

for location, length of program and percentage of virtual learning use, no *notable* design differences were noted between interviewees' blended program designs. Interviewees' opinions on the use of virtual delivery for specific activities are described in each of the six elements; whereas, the effects of the use of different *locations* are located in the *Reactions to Overall Learning Experience - Implicit Beliefs* section. The impact of the various lengths of the blended learning programs accounted for a notable part of the difference between the three main program types described in Figures 2,3 and 4.

According to data, the respective combination of a subset of six learning elements accounted for the main distinctions between the three program types as illustrated in Figures 2,3 and 4. However, for interviewees, their opinions of their blended learning experiences depended even more on the way in which each of these core elements was used or experienced as part of their blended learning experience.

The following six elements consistently appear in each of the programs described, and thus, are therefore considered "core" to the blended learning experience designs. The six core elements are ranked from most to least frequently observed in interviewees' descriptions.

1. Coaching & Mentoring (coaching, psychometrics, mentoring)
2. Projects (individual projects, group projects)
3. Individual Assignments (action plans, reflection, readings, learner generated)
4. Content Sessions (lectures, webinars)
5. Networking (discussion, social, dialogue)
6. Follow-up

The following descriptions recount participants' perspectives on their experience of each of the six common elements identified in their learning experiences.

Element 1: Coaching & Mentoring

Not surprisingly, the first element, *executive coaching*, was almost ubiquitous in the three types of leadership development programs illustrated in Figures 2, 3 and 4. As an established development methodology, perhaps it should have been expected that both 1) the coaching development objectives pursued as well as 2) the coaching process used, were also fairly consistent across programs. Reassuringly, by and large, participants understood the reason for using coaching in programs, and appreciated the value it delivered. As stated by one participant, executive coaching was "wonderful in taking broad ideas and helping process them... to develop abilities." In that sense, a coach was "a bouncing board" whose goal was to "help participants develop abilities for themselves as opposed to giving more instruction."

Most executive coaching was focused on the individual and took place through one-to-one sessions. However, group coaching was used in some programs where "the role of the coach is to be a facilitator of what is going on in the team."

The coaching process typically started with some type of leadership impact or personality-type assessment instrument. The most common psychometric instruments used were the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) personality inventory, the Birkman behavioral assessment and 360-degree feedback. Interviewees valued these instruments as a key part of their development program as illustrated by one participant describing them as "a wonderful foundation to help me understand my own style as well as helping my coach work with me."

One important step in the coaching process that also carried a bit of risk was the pairing of participants with their respective coaches, most often done before the program began. While

coaching was a positive experience for most of the interviewees, “mismatches” reduced coaching’s effectiveness for some. As highlighted by one interviewee,

I heard from other women who participated that the coaching was extremely valuable. I would agree with that generally. The concept is great and I would have put it higher on the list except for the fact that I did not think my coach and I particularly connected. It could have been more impactful if it had been a good fit.

This mismatch was not an isolated incident. Several interviewees reported mismatches and a lack of connection with their coach. Unfortunately, those who did also reported that they did not have any opportunity to discuss changing their coach to a better fit. Even when learners were “given a coach with whom they [had] an initial phone call... to talk about...what they wanted to get out of the program,” poor matches still occurred. In the words of one interviewee, “If I had it to do over again, I wish there was a way I could have identified earlier that it was not a good fit and have found a way to switch.” Unfortunately, the lack of feedback or rectification of the mismatch negatively impacted one of the most valued and pervasive parts of the programs for some people.

Perhaps surprisingly, despite the prolific use of the element and its relative significance to the interviewees’ experiences, few collaboration tools were provided to support coaches and coachees in their program’s coaching activities. While a few participants reported using shared notebooks with their coach and some mentioned using web conferencing plus video or Skype for remote meetings, most coaches and interviewees resorted to phone calls.

Several participants reported positive effects from continuing the coaching beyond the formal completion of their program. In some cases, post-program coaching was part of the original design, as “the coaching component was available for six months after the program, to help participants...refine and put it into practice their personal strategy.” Some learners addressed the need by prolonging the relationship with their coach under their own initiative.

I wound up hiring my coach to continue applying a lot of what I learned, and because she had the basis for understanding my own style, I’ve been able to continue the benefits of the program longer-term.

In other programs, learners were assigned to “coaching clusters.” Coaching clusters were described as groups of four or five peers who work together to share feedback and reflections on each others’ experiences in the role using the coaching process. Several participants reported still participating in their coaching clusters long after the program ended.

Other development support models such as mentors and manager involvement were only mentioned occasionally by participants. Most participants reported little if any “manager involvement” in the coaching process. Yet, those who involved their manager saw benefits, “it showed...that he was engaged in my development; so having him participate occasionally, I thought it showed that he was on board with this.” No information was reported on the reasons for the differences between the various coaching models. Most individuals compared their experiences either to their own expectations or to their classmates’, as few, if any, reported having had any previous coaching.

Element 2: Projects

The second key element, *projects*, was the action learning methodology of choice for designers who wanted to ensure application of program insights back to participants' work. As one interviewee shared,

My perception is that [the project] was a formal avenue that made you think about what you were learning over the course of that time frame and practice what you had been exposed to rather than just passively taking on information.

Most projects described by participants focused on organizational growth or personal leadership. Projects aimed at organizational growth were typically identified by the organization, and often supported by internal stakeholders. According to one interviewee, "The organization arranged different challenges in advance that we were facing...These were real-life issues within the company." On the other hand, projects aimed at personal growth were typically identified by the participant and often supported by their program director, coach or line manager.

Subject Selection

Project subject selection was a major contributor to the overall effectiveness of the project-work element. There were two sides to the selection issue, the participant and the organization.

For most interviewees, project selection was a personal choice that "made a big difference" in their perceived value of the program (i.e. the amount learned.) There were several cases in which the project chosen by the participant was simply was not enough of a stretch, thereby resulting in a less impactful program experience for the blended learning participant.

The project I ended up choosing was very much within my day-to-day, but in reflection was not enough of a stretch. It was something I worked on that probably did not reinforce the content as much because it was already skills that I possess. There were a few other people who had the same feeling.

The same "lack of stretch" was reported by another interviewee. "I did not choose the right project, so it did not reinforce what I was trying to learn."

On the flip side, the organization also had mixed success in its selection of appropriate projects. The state of the organization and business contributed to the effectiveness of the selected projects. As highlighted by one participant,

The real reason it was not a good project was at the time there was a lot of change going on in the organization. It did not appear to me that the company engaged the right people, got them into the mind set to be able to think about improvement work. So, it was more around what was happening in the organization at the time.

Support

Support also contributed significantly to project success. Whether the support manifested as a manager, an executive sponsor or a mentor, the projects that had sponsorship built into the overall project approach were rated more positively. As one interviewee shared, the role of a manager or sponsor was to "verify that what I was doing was something that would help me."

Some projects had facilitators assigned to help keep the team stay on track as described by one interviewee.

[Our leader] would join almost every one of our calls, and he attended the face-to-face meetings so he kept us on track, got us to think of different things, thought about our pitches that we were making, did they make sense.

As to be expected, many projects that focused on business challenges had executive support. “You also get assigned [a sponsor] to your working group, and you get a description of your business challenge by your executive sponsor -- a coach but at the same time one who benefits...from the work the team will do.” Sponsor support was critical when tied to the outcome.

Overall Experience

The consensus on project work was that it required a tremendous amount of effort, but if applied in the right way, the effort was well worth it. “It was a good opportunity – great exposure, great networking.” The general sentiment was best summed up by these words from one participant:

We were complaining throughout, but at the end we realized how good it was. It wasn't so much a project as it was a true learning leadership project. Learning about other parts of the business, networking, approaching things differently .You're amongst very senior people yourself, so how do you collaborate and work as a team? Who's going to do what? Who's going to be the leader, who's not going to be the leader? When do you speak up? When do you not? That's a kind of learning you don't even know you're doing.

Element 3: Individual Assignments

Individual assignments were the third type of element identified across programs. These assignments took different forms, depending on the context of the program. Four categories were the most prevalent: preparation, application, development and testing (knowledge transfer). The following sections expand on these different types of individual assignments.

Preparation

As part of most programs, some sort of “foundation” was offered to initiate the learning process. Whether in the form of articles, books, videos or pre-work, these primers were mostly geared toward preparing and level-setting each learner for subsequent sessions to be delivered in-person.

Despite understanding the intended objective of these materials, which was to support their experience, learners seemed most concerned with managing the workload.

There are pre-reads, which are important, but it is also important not to be overwhelmed because there is a conflict with your other responsibilities The investment of my time and effort helped prepare me for doing as much as I can and optimizing my experiences while I was away.

However, “doing as much as I can” was not always the approach taken by all cohort members. Several participants were irritated by their colleague’s different levels of pre-work completion because *incomplete pre-work* triggered additional content review sessions by faculty in the synchronous sessions, creating a feeling of wasted time and effort for those who had completed it. One learner explicitly expressed frustration at the assumed need for repetition of pre-work during the in-person sessions.

They said we were going to read a book and work through 15 different case studies. What was a bit incongruent was that they assume you're not going to read the books anyway and they go over them all the same.

Application

To assist learners in applying their learning throughout their program experience, providers typically gave learners journals or writing prompts. "They had several workbooks that presented ways to capture the ideas and note our responses to the suggested questions. They were like guides to help us take the information and process it and apply it to ourselves." Many of these materials were provided as tools to aid the learning experience, but their use was left up to the learner's discretion and preference. "We got all the materials. We wrote notes. We wrote journals. We had a feedback letter from each individual and from the coach, but it's your own independence to apply."

Development

Individual action plans were often used to focus on actions the individual could take to grow as a leader. One learner described the benefit of the action planning process. Interviewees appreciated tools provided to support the action planning process.

They asked us to come up with some short-term and long-term goals and some practical ways we could apply our learning they gave us a template to fill out that would help us come up with some of those goals, and a high-level timeline. That was a really good tool to help me implement the things I had learned. That plan started after the on-site courses, so we had some things we could work on immediately.

Another learner explained the use of a less prescriptive action planning process:

We had a little notebook in which we were writing stuff down. When we finished the full week, we worked on our plans and then when we spoke with our coaches and our coaching group, we talked about what our plans were, how we were going to move forward with them, and get suggestions.

Designers relied on individual assignments such as journal and action plans to help the learners internalize and capture their individual sense-making as they moved through each phase of their program. These approaches helped interviewees further customize their learning experience to their individual needs.

Calibrating

On specific topics, some learners were given material to read or videos to watch and then "tested" to ensure they had learned the respective content. The use of testing seemed entirely exclusive to online content and technical knowledge such as finance or accounting. Learners expressed mixed reactions to this type of knowledge calibration. The functional nature of the knowledge transfer approach was described by one learner.

[Online-asynchronous] was like a levelling ground. We had some learning tools for just online, and I liked it. But they never have the level of richness you get when you are face-to-face. [Online-asynchronous] can be great as a preliminary tool to create a level of awareness and a level of basic knowing what you know.

While some found value in the enhanced knowledge, they often yearned for a richer, more communal and less isolated means of learning the information.

Interviewees who wanted more challenge and intensity from their online experiences did not distinguish whether more interaction or more intense work would have improved their experience. For example, one participant seemed to believe that both could have improved his blended learning experience.

I would have loved to have more of a class or something like an executive MBA type structure where the off-site component is not just readings but interactions that provide value. The on-site obviously will provide value. But the off-site could – for this program. I wish it had been a little more intensive, a little bit more connected.

It is important to note that not every interviewee reported wanting more intensity in the programs. Several individuals mentioned the need to balance the intensity of their work with demands of the program and felt the individual assignments were sufficient and they appreciated not having to re-cover old ground. In short, many thought the individual assignments “did what they said on the tin.”

In summary, individual assignments were leveraged to establish a working level of knowledge on critical topics, support reflective learning and keep the learner engaged throughout the entire program experience. Whether the intent was for knowledge transfer or professional growth, these activities helped individuals personalize their learning while also enabling a more meaningful blended learning experience. Supporting tools made it easier to ensure a collective learning experience despite the distance between the individuals.

Element 4: Content Sessions

The fourth key learning element identified consistently throughout the programs was content sessions. Exposure to new ideas was undoubtedly one of the core elements participants sought when choosing to attend a development program. Not surprisingly, the new insights, concepts and lessons were largely transmitted via lectures; some offline, some online. For the most part, participants admitted to enjoying this learning method, assuming certain conditions were met.

The first and foremost condition mentioned referred to the way faculties’ or lecturers’ ideas and style affected their blended program experience. Some participants were “moved” by a few presenters’ content. “Their ideas were exciting. I felt like there were new things for me to pursue, ideas that I hadn’t even considered before.” Other participants were equally impacted by lecturers’ style. “The presenter was dynamic and thought-provoking.”

Group structure design was the second condition that affected the impact of the content sessions. Overall, designers used a range of content session groupings to create peer interactions (e.g., plenary group, small groups, threesomes, pairs, role-plays). However, despite the commonly known range of and benefit from mixing learning design options, a few program designers overlooked the power of using a variety of peer interactions to support their blended learning designs. One participant described a sense of boredom and “was less enamored with the larger presentations. There were a couple of them that went on for too long.”

Designers who mixed session peer-interactions thoughtfully received praise. More and more, program lectures were interspersed with other activities such as small breakout groups. According to one participant,

It wasn’t like a lecture for eight hours, where you would just sit and listen. It was a small lecture, followed by some hands-on stuff and they kept going back and forth with it, so you were always forced to be engaged. You know how lectures go when it’s straight

lecturing – you can zone out quite quickly after a period of time. Getting that break, to discuss helps.

Yet, simply breaking out into smaller groups was not enough. As another interviewee put it, “the breakouts had to have a purpose in the learning process.” Sometimes “[designers used] groups and break-outs and asked us to report back. But it went nowhere... the report-backs were fairly useless.”

In addition to traditional face-to-face large plenary style lectures, online plenary lectures were identified as another main design choice for program sessions. Online lectures were used in most of the programs described and were typically 90 minutes long. Content for these lectures centered around two types of information, 1) introductory-level academic concepts or 2) presentations by program stakeholders (program staff or company executives). According to most interviewees, “The virtual [WebEx] sessions were very good for information sharing. I think these technological solutions are good as a way of communicating or learning.”

Interestingly, though, some interviewees indicated the content sessions were not the only knowledge that was important to them. Some commented that designers packed too much into programs, thereby reducing time for meaningful interactions and digesting ideas. Whether it was the length of a session or the amount of sessions in a module, blended learning participants wanted to interact with the content on their own as well as with their classmates.

Element 5: Networking

Not surprisingly, one of the elements that learners appreciated the most from their blended learning program was the possibility of meeting and learning from like-minded professionals. Even while learning new content, interviewees appreciated learning from their classmates. Thus, the fifth, and penultimate, element found consistently across the three design types was networking.

Blended program designers also recognized the value provided by networking and peer-learning. Consequently, they embedded a number of peer interaction opportunities in their programs. As highlighted by one participant, in a typical program “many things are facilitated - in terms of dinner, a museum visit... a lot of social activities to boost the interaction between the various participants of the group.”

Interestingly though, the activities mentioned were mainly limited to the residential modules in almost every program described. Little evidence emerged of including activities to increase peer-to-peer interaction prior to starting, in between in-person sessions or following a program’s formal conclusion. Missed opportunities were mentioned by several interviewees. In fact, several interviewees suggested that mechanisms should have been introduced early in the program and continued following the conclusion of the event. These would have helped promote networking and relationship building between peers.

I’m not saying that everything has to tail-off and it isn’t the school’s responsibility to keep it going for 2 years, but I think you can make it more impactful for longer and you can build it earlier. Then, people are in a mindset.

For example, “before the program... you received a list of all the participants.” Beyond this list, however, few additional activities aimed at fostering participants’ relationships. Likewise, following a program’s completion, designers was little done to sustain relationships. Participants were often “encouraged to join an alumni group.” Yet, the alumni groups were somewhat generic professional networks that included non-cohort members, thereby eliminating their main social

connection. As a result, participants sometimes took their own initiative networking to satisfy the need to connect with others from their programs and continue the relationships they had developed. However, in doing so, learning experience providers opted out of a logical and meaningful role in a continued, critical relationship.

Participants discussed remedies they put in place themselves to overcome what they perceived as a shortcoming of their program experience. Typical solutions involved resorting to social networking tools. As shared by one participant, “an initiative was created from one of the participants. A WhatsApp group was formed. We also later linked up with LinkedIn.” Others, however, went further and sought to meet individuals in-person to jumpstart their experience. As mentioned by a lone program participant from the Netherlands, “There was a conference held in Amsterdam in which one participant from Ireland came over with whom I established contact and went to dinner. That was before the module started.”

There was evidence that these participant-led networking initiatives worked, both as a way to break the ice before the first face-to-face meeting as well as a mechanism to extend the conversation beyond the program. As one participant pointed out, “our WhatsApp group is still alive and kicking. There are many group chats. We seek each other out with particular questions.”

However, not everyone was a fan of social media suggestions. “I don't think having a Facebook page or having people send me tweets would have added anything to my particular experience,” said one participant. The question was whether this skepticism was related merely to the tools themselves, which some saw as a distraction, or if these individuals valued the relationship opportunities differently. For example, some participants confessed having “a hard time keeping up on my email,” and therefore, did not “want to be bombarded with a bunch of other input.” On the other hand, as previously mentioned, many participants seemed to find value in specific types of social media involvement with applications such as LinkedIn or WhatsApp. Interviewees mentioned that these helped them stay in touch with classmates and discuss program content application and perspectives after the program, more commonly known in executive education circles as the ever elusive follow-up.

Element 6: Follow-up

The final component, follow-up or continuation of the learning experience to enhance the impact, was rarely mentioned by interviewees. Application and follow-through were largely left to the learners' initiative. Continued contact also included relationships and staying in touch with fellow participants: “If you choose to keep in touch with your group, that's at your discretion, but we didn't get anything personalized or customized.” Efforts were made by some program teams to engage learners through follow-up emails, or as one learner described, “*booster shots* where after the program they continued for a few weeks to send us small videos from the institute, but nothing more.”

In the customised company specific programs, follow-up proved a little easier due to shared context and crossing paths. Despite this “convenience”, follow-up was still left up to participants. As one interviewee put it, “[Follow-up] was self-driven, but typically 75% of the groups tend to keep in touch...the emotional context of that program formed a bond that was easier to keep connected.” For those few programs that intentionally built in follow-up support mechanisms, the feedback was positive. The mechanisms helped participants apply key learnings in their day-to-day work, including coaching and supported peer learning groups.

In the instances where coaching was used for follow-up, the process was often supported by a personal development plan:

The idea was that based on the Birkman and the 360, we had these workbooks where we noted the things that we needed to work on—aspects of our working style that were difficult or we had received feedback telling us to work on it—and the idea was to brainstorm and figure out ways of improving. We did this with the coach. They were almost like homework assignments where we would come up with a plan; a stepped approach to work on particular areas.

One of the more generous follow-up provisions observed, the coaching support continued with the learner for about three months following the conclusion of the program,.

A less common mechanism reportedly used as a follow-up approach was “supported peer learning groups.” In these groups, post-program webinars were conducted by lead faculty for the cohort.

The webinars summarized what we experienced during the program and then we broke into clusters to discuss some of that. It was an interesting way to follow-up, and the follow-up was important because it would have been easy for the information to come and go. It was an interesting way to continue the program.

In terms of ensuring application of the learning, the supported peer learning groups helped embed the lessons and behavioral shifts beyond the formal conclusion of the program. As expressed by one interviewee, “I still continue those to this day. You ...have this shared experience. You can discuss some of the learnings and how you’ve been applying them in your day-to-day role.” Being able to continue to connect with the people, the lessons and the emotions created a more meaningful experience for the participants which was reflected in the descriptions of and their reactions to their learning experiences.

In summary, the reappearance of the the six common learning elements used throughout the learning experiences provided *explicit* insights into those elements experienced and valued by participants. Coaching & Mentoring proved to be the most pervasive in use, followed next by Projects, Individual Assignments and Content Sessions and, finally, Networking and Follow-up. With the exception of Networking, Individual Assignments and Follow-up, the use of technology in the elements did not change the impact of the specific elements, nor did it modify the way the underlying need was met by the program designer. The limited use of online mode to blend the program elements left several opportunities for improving the program designs further as highlighted by the range of participants’ comments.

Reactions to Overall Learning Experience - Implicit Beliefs

By taking a transversal look at interviewees’ responses and grouping them according to similarly related sentiments, five themes emerged that indicated interviewees’ *implicit* beliefs regarding their overall blended learning experience. The five themes included:

1. Searching for meaning
2. Desire to learn more than just business
3. Preference for designs that are Fit for purpose
4. Learning a new way to learn
5. Making it easy to experience the learning

The following descriptions explain the basis of the themes in the order in which participants encountered them in their blended learning experiences.

Theme 1: Searching for Meaning

It is said that managers play one of the most critical roles in an employee's employment experience. Managers interpret the meaning of the organization's business and objectives for their teams. Equally, meaning and context are an important aspect of adult learning. In fact, socio-constructive learning theory argues that learning is a negotiated meaning between people. Therefore, it was no surprise that interviewees described their desire to understand the circumstances and players involved in their learning experience. Implicitly, participants wanted to understand the reasons behind their selection for the program, the potential for learning and therefore relationship with other learners, the level of their employer's support and the signals that indicated these key messages.

Why Me?

Participants were preoccupied with the circumstances that led to their selection and the meaning of the selection on their future with the organization. Despite the positive signal, not all received clear messages. Some had been told *why* they had been chosen and what their selection meant for them; some had not.

For those who had not been told, finding out why they had been selected was one of the "first questions that came to mind." These participants speculated if their respective inclusion signalled the organization's recognition of their potential relative to their peers.

There were some people who were close to the leadership team who told me that [how we were selected] was probably a combination of performance and time spent in the organization. I don't know how true that was because there were people who had only been in the organization for one year doing the training sessions.

Preoccupation with reasons for selection was understandable. Participants had often been involved with recommending others in the past, and knew that selection was an indicator of something "more important than just development needs."

I knew it was for the cream, that it was a very high-profile program and that we were nominating the best people. I was expecting emails to go to others in my unit...and then I received one myself. So, it was surprising and I was proud.

One participant was reportedly "thrilled [he was] selected for something like that." In fact, to some, the feeling created by the positive signal was even more powerful than the program content or the challenges balancing the increased workload. As expressed by one interviewee,

My first reaction was I was absolutely enchanted and honored to be chosen. My second reaction was excitement about learning something new. My third reaction was to ask myself how I was going to get everything else done that doesn't go away with my job while I am learning.

Selection for their program often helped participants understand *how* they were perceived in their organization. Organizations that clearly communicated *why* their individuals were selected also further motivated the individuals to take part in the learning experience and, in turn, got better contributions from them.

Who Else?

Many interviewees felt program teams could have been more forthcoming with information related to those they were to be learning with. The method of communication did not matter as much as the information's completeness, timing and quality. Missing information created a lack of understanding and thus, cognitive dissonance, and hampered participants from making meaningful connections.

First, all participants noted having had some form of introduction to their peers, but in most cases the information provided was insufficient. Information about their peers was important to building relationships, to their ability to contribute to their fullest and even to their motivation. Participants did not view information on their cohort members as extraordinary, rather "just the normal things you want to understand, especially if you're going to invest a lot of time."

Second, the point at which interviewees had access to information about their peers was also important, but, in many cases, the delivery timing was poor. Information timeliness was so important to interviewees that several participants felt compelled to commit extra effort to filling the information gap themselves. One interviewee even mentioned that the quality of his feedback suffered because he couldn't push back as much without knowing his peers better. His perceived superficial level of relationship with his cohort members affected this person's ability to participate in some of the programs activities.

In short, interviewees felt it was important to know their peers in order to interact with them most authentically and to the fullest.

Who is Supporting Me?

In addition to those they were learning with, participants viewed their organizational sponsorship as a critical success factor. Senior leaders' level of involvement served as a proxy signal of their organization's commitment to their learning too. More specifically, interviewees were concerned with the level of support from their line manager and organization. For example, one interviewee "thought it was good because it was more just to show [my line manager] supported and was engaged in my development." Surprisingly, another individual mentioned the project helped fill a "relationship gap" between him and his line manager; until the project, he hadn't been able to get much of his manager's attention.

Still, other interviewees looked to senior involvement in kick-off meetings and email invitations to gauge their organisations' recognition and engagement. The type of communication did not matter either. Even simple communications of the sponsorship such as "a personal email from a group HR head, your own manager and the CEO, who was copied in, was very special."

How Effective were Communications Methods?

In general, participants viewed a range of activities as useful for communicating the meaning of their selection, the nature of their peers and their organization's level of sponsorship. Activities such as kick-off events, individual meetings, emails and letters were mentioned as meaningful means of communication for this type of information.

Participants suggested better kick-off sessions and communications could have improved their overall experience. Better information on expectations, activity involvement, clarifying the agenda, and linking back to the organization's needs would have made kick-offs more useful. As one participant summed it up, "A more well-defined kickoff where you're truly setting

expectations and getting clear on what the agenda is...what it means to be selected. That would have been a more thorough kickoff than it actually was.”

Participants also made suggestions for improving the communication and contextualization for participants of blended learning experiences. Suggestions ranged from providing participant profiles on platforms to meeting each other in advance of virtual sessions. Others thought that “having a small bio on each individual is a great thing to do. That way you know who else you’re working with and who you’re going to learn from...” Yet, other interviewees suggested “recording a two-minute video about yourself [to get] people engaging really quickly.” Across the board, many felt that without more information on those involved, interviewees were unable to fully access and engage with their peers to share their knowledge.

Theme 2: Desire to Learn More than Just Business

It was clear from the data that participants were interested in gaining more than just technical business knowledge from their blended programs. Participants appreciated the various knowledge that went beyond the business content describing the power of their experience as the result of a “blend of everything.” Programs praised for their blend included information or experiences reached beyond the course topics, to lessons about their organization, their “career”, their colleagues, application to their “personal life” and relationship building.

Non-course Topics

According to many participants, the program’s geographic location affected *what* they learned as much as *where* they learned it. “There were a lot of great lectures, a lot of site visits even with [the school], so that part of the module was learning about the global economy, how it impacts local markets, particularly in the US.”

In addition to different business practices, these “in-market” visits exposed individuals to different cultural norms. By visiting locations such as India, China, Russia or even Virginia, interviewees learned more about similarities and differences with their own mental models. Interviewees reported that the additions touched them emotionally as well as professionally. The in-market visits “made quite an impact.” One person even described it as “the experience of a lifetime, particularly going into people’s homes in India, which is something you cannot learn from a book.”

In other cases, participating in learning experiences that were part of a university or prestigious brand positively affected their confidence and self-esteem. Some of the interviewees had believed these exclusive communities had been beyond their reach until accessed for them by their company. The power of the settings in which the programs took place managed to go beyond interviewees’ expectations of themselves, not to mention beyond their business’ objectives.

Learning about their Organization

Interviewees also liked getting additional information about their senior leaders, the potential roles and the challenges experienced in higher levels of their organizations. Participants from one custom program stated, “It was a great experience to [get to] know more about [their company] and get an exposure to other divisions of the business.” Clearly, in this case, technology made it possible to broaden participation from senior leaders and experts in the blended programs.

Understanding Themselves and their Careers

While increasing “self knowledge” was described as a deliberate design and learning outcome, the impact of improved self-awareness went far beyond the actual content in the classroom. On a personal level, interviewees valued elements that supported their current and future prospects. “It was very relevant to both existing business and future career, and application to personal life as well.” Blended activities helped participants develop better self awareness.

For a different participant, his program’s blended experience design enabled a deeper, more relevant engagement with his development needs over time.

It was very relevant to both existing business and future career, and applicable to personal life as well. It was unlike negative experiences where I’ve had to read books and case studies. I got to give my coach my 10 pages – I ended up writing 15 pages. I got into it. It gave an insight to them to really accelerate the program. I’d never done that before.

Finally, a few interviewees noted that their blended learning experiences even brought some them closer to their line managers. For one participant, his boss, the Finance Director for all regional activities, had limited time with the participant. The interviewee mentioned “I do not meet [the supervisor] very often. This project gave us the opportunity to be together and to follow the project’s advancement. It gave us a good opportunity for discussion.” Another interviewee agreed. She commented on the enhanced relationship with her line manager as a result of the project. “It gave me an opportunity to have focused meetings with my leader to discuss this project and to have her insight. It was something that I appreciated.” It appeared that some of the learning activities created a piece of work, or formal reason, to schedule conversations now rather, than when they were convenient. In other words, the projects forced individuals to make time to spend time together in the job.

Relationship Building

It was no surprise that relationship building was, therefore, a key learning expectation expressed by all interviewees. Whether connections were established simply for the duration of the program or beyond completion of the learning experience, interviewees learned a significant amount from various human interactions. Programs that facilitated meaningful connections and relationship development between participants were most impactful for interviewees.

However, interviewees did not agree on the role technology played in building relationships. Although all used technology to maintain work relationships and for conference calls, some argued that developing relationships online was difficult. As one participant put it, “building those relationships so that you have the ability to influence...through the course and with other participants. That obviously was difficult remotely via WebEx and teleconferences.”

On the flip side, other participants believed using technology more would have helped. Indeed, many stated that the use of technology on the program was insufficient and would have improved networking and relationship development. As one interviewee put it, “[the program] was well-organized, but you didn’t have access to anyone’s details, the platform was very institutional and typical ‘internet’, so it wasn’t so easy.” These participants seemed to be more accustomed to connecting with others remotely via technology. Consequently, they expected similar tools to be used in their programs.

It would have been nice to have more information about [our peers] or at least know who you were going to be working with, because you have a lot of time between the modules. It would have been nice to get more information about the people in your live-in group in

advance... With the tools we have today, we could have seen the participants in some way and have at least a mini-introduction to who we are and what we do.

Theme 3: Preference for Designs that are Fit for Purpose

Participants stressed the importance of using the right element (method) with the right delivery (mode) to ensure the learning experience was truly *fit-for-purpose*. Interviewees recognized and appreciated designers' clever selection of the right methods and modes for the right outcomes at the right time. While there was a preference for face-to-face learning, participants acknowledged that in many circumstances face-to-face experiences were no longer exclusively feasible nor desirable.

Many who expressed positive views on the use of technology, appreciated that the designers "did a good job thinking through what they could do virtually and what works best face-to-face." In that sense, they felt technology enhanced the possible solution set for designers.

Yet, not everyone was initially excited about their "blended learning opportunity." Indeed, some interviewees were disappointed and had negative expectations of online learning; but, by the end of their respective blended programs, most ended up having had a good experience and changed their mind.

It was my first online learning experience. I was kind of skeptical as to how that would work. Honestly, I was not too hopeful and my expectations weren't that high. I was waiting to see what would happen. But for a first experience, it was actually really good.

Despite some reticent learners, participants repeatedly mentioned feeling the use of technology was well done and their blended programs were "well put together", "well organized" and overall "very good." The following paragraphs describe the type of content interviewees believed was best served by specific modes.

Interviewees saw virtual learning as more appropriate and even beneficial for technical level-setting and knowledge transfer. As described by one interviewee, "Webinars were good for information delivery rather than visual context." Several participants agreed that "online was a good medium to manage different levels of knowledge." As stated by one participant, "Finance was quite long, around 10 hours of work. Doing it in a classroom would have been quite taxing."

Online learning also offered flexibility and diversity. Online recordings provided a backup in case of scheduling conflicts or a desire to review complex concepts. The ability to watch multiple times improved flexibility and enhanced the learning for all. Equally, session recordings also increased diversity of the discussions by supporting those who did not speak English as a first language as did webinars and platforms. Online webinars and platforms supported "pre-submission of questions and typing discussion contributions," key aspects that enable non-native English speaking participants to participate more confidently, thereby improving a more diverse multilingual learning discussion. Based on the different forms of communication supported, international leaders were able to contribute to a more robust discussion.

Face-to-face, on the other hand, was favored more by interviewees when context affected the key learning objective. Experiential visits were a strong example of the need for physical presence. Experiencing the content "in-context" enhanced the learning experience, incorporating many senses, creating different insights and enabling participants to interact with the lessons in a more tangible and memorable way. Participants recognized the impact on the knowledge

retention, as described by one interviewee, “The experiential piece is a positive. You can hold onto that a little bit more and reflect back on it.”

Overall, attention to selecting the specific delivery mode to fit the specific element (method) created more meaningful programs for the interviewees. They recognized and appreciated the effort to ensure each was *fit-for-purpose*. Those who began as advocates of face-to-face learning changed many of their views of the role online learning could play and the quality and relevance of the interactions it could provide.

Theme 4: Learning a New Way to Learn

One of the most interesting themes to emerge related to participants’ level of knowledge of learning practices. Familiarity with traditional as well as blended learning practices varied across the interviewees and their organizations. Although learning has been generally accepted as a core skill for successful organizations and their leaders, interviewees revealed many areas for improvement with respect to their “learning skills”.

Limited Understanding of the Learning Process

Most program designers assumed individuals knew how to learn in a blended fashion. Most assumed participants knew what to do and how to use learning tools or work skills to accomplish their programs efficiently and effectively. Participants also assumed they knew how to learn. Few participants referenced needing an understanding of the learning process throughout their program. Yet, based on interview comments, individuals appeared to be less knowledgeable about key learning activities than was required to be most effective.

First, many learning limitations had to do with issues unrelated to the design of the learning process, rather a lack of experience with specific elements. Several individuals mentioned having made mistakes in project selection, mismatches with coaches and insufficient follow-up activities. With better understanding of how to accomplish or “learn from” each, they could have simply reduced if not even eliminated these challenges. According to program descriptions, how to use these elements most effectively did not feature almost all of the interviews. Moreover, standard issue resolution processes were not formally built into the programs according to those who were mismatched.

Additionally, several participants were surprised by the concept of “reflective learning.” One participant described how “they taught us about reflective learning”, something that while quite common in executive learning practices was new to the participant. Those who knew more about reflective learning indicated that programs taught them “how to stop and do the self-reflection”. This suggests that despite knowing about the importance of reflection, most had still not been able to incorporate it successfully into their daily activities.

Learning tools helped address some of the challenges. Interviewees valued journaling and mentioned the *reflective question prompting* style journal as one of the most impactful tools for their experience. Coaching also provided useful support. Coaching was familiar to some and new to others, but matching was critical to its success.

In virtual activities, the lack of confidence in the learning process was more pronounced. According to many, interviewees did not feel they were well-versed in using virtual tools, much less using them for learning. “The virtual world is difficult and has many obstacles. We could probably use digital media and web conferencing more, but we do not. It is not culturally inculcated here.”

Problem-based learning appeared in the form of projects. When asked about their projects, participants wished they had known more about the time demands, as well as received better guidance in project selection. Again, they did not fully understand the process and requirements for success.

The most pronounced learning skill deficit was the need to better integrate learning into daily work habits. Building the learning into one's everyday life was not easy as explained by this interviewee. "I would have to be forced to do [the learning] because I do not have the initiative or expertise to do it on my own. Having said that, it has been worthwhile." Even interviewees explicitly recognized their need to improve their self-learning skills.

Busy work responsibilities and perceived distractions played a significant role in interviewees' expectations about learning modes. Many believed work habits conflicted with virtual learning. For example, although many were "very comfortable as a way of communicating or learning" via web-conferencing, many felt learning was less successful via virtual mode. "We were more effective when we were away working on the project for five or six consecutive hours as opposed to trying to do it every two weeks by phone." Therefore, on projects, interviewees had a strong preference for spending time together, especially in focused chunks of time.

However, the learning mode was controversial; some believed in the importance of "taking them out of the work" to learn, while others preferred "learning in the work." One participant explicitly stated that he "preferred on the job learning". In his mind, blended experiences represented a better way forward - one that was more fit-for-purpose based on its flexibility to accommodate learning while remaining at work.

Learning the New Way to Learn

Views on the impact of technology in a blended experience seemed to vary by type of learning activity and familiarity with the use of technology. That said, many interviewees looked forward to the experience and most were open to the role technology could play in their journey. As described by one interviewee,

The combination of different methodologies is essential to the highest quality of learning. The in-person part is really important for all the benefits that you can get from that, but having things to connect [in-person to] back at work is also an essential part. I can see where each piece on its own has its benefits, but the combination creates a stronger, longer lasting effect. The combination is what made the program so special.

Yet, interviewees clearly needed help learning how to use certain digital tools. As one person described, "if there were some tools to help facilitate [working and learning online], that would be fantastic." Despite having worked with some of these tools in their jobs, few participants communicated a sense of proficiency with them. Hence, participants sought help using the tools deployed in their programs. In other words, they were asking for help learning how to learn.

When participants expressed a preference for in-person learning, the question was whether or not this preference was related to actual limitations of alternative learning modes (i.e. online or design mismatches) or simply the result of them being "more familiar experiences" (i.e. face-to-face). Indeed, while some participants were skeptical about virtual learning activities at first, after experiencing it, they grew to like it and appreciated the benefits of staying put.

Once participants had experienced these tools, individuals began speculating on other technologies and the most appropriate uses to support their learning. For example, when faced

with having used telepresence for a classroom discussion to avoid traveling, one interviewee began to “design” different uses. In fact, he believed telepresence would have been more effective if used *later* in the group work.

It was really the moment to start rolling up the sleeves and start framing what we were going to propose, confronting that with the key stakeholders. That was the context in which we thought the telepresence would be more appropriate.

Therefore, teaching executives how to use digital learning tools that support a blended learning experience appears to play a role in participants’ ability to adopt this new way of learning. Left alone, participants tend to revert to “what they know.” As one interviewee admitted, they “weren’t even using Dropbox. We’re emailing the agenda and things like that because there’s only a few of them, and that’s more intuitive to us.”

Theme 5: Making it Easy to Experience the Learning

While interviewees’ by and large appreciated their blended experiences, many comments suggested a desire for further streamlining the learning journey. It was no surprise that interviewees expressed a desire to reduce the effort required to access and engage with their learning experience. Although these could have been interpreted as problems of cognitive overload, they raised suggestions for improving effectiveness and efficiency. Ultimately, participants craved a better way to balance between work, learning and sometimes even personal life - rather than having to accept these as mutually exclusive activities.

Avoiding Cognitive Overload

According to G.A. Miller cognitive load is the total effort being expended from working memory, and individuals have cognitive limits. In the 1980’s John Sweller identified the potential for learning designers to reduce the cognitive load used for learning. As such, the potential for overload was, not surprisingly, an issue for the executives we interviewed.

The need for “easy-to-learn” did not indicate participants’ lack of enthusiasm for learning; on the contrary. The need resulted from an honest rendition of the pressure these executives experienced daily. Language from the interviews provided a window into participants’ workloads and mindsets. Frequent references to “time”, “other priorities”, “bombarded”, “bunch of other inputs”, “stress” and “worry” all indicated concerns for successfully meeting implicit program requirements. Other descriptions such as “very handy”, “help facilitate”, “enabling”, “helpful”, “fit into our schedules”, “easy-to-use”, “simple”, “user friendly” and “reminders” provided insights into ways programs had, or could have, successfully supported their learning process.

Evidence of cognitive overload surfaced in the form of the knowing-doing gap. Several participants described that in many cases, they knew what to do, and had good intentions, but could not find the energy to change their behavior. For example, one participant admitted having known that “[reflection would] improve the course impact, but had not done in the past because I had no time.” Similarly, most participants found they had “so much to do on return that [action items from their program got] put lower and lower on the priority list.”

Some interviewees appreciated the inclusion in their experience of follow-up virtual sessions and coaching clusters to help them overcome their overwhelming workload on return. They felt these elements were essential in “forcing them to go back and do their homework.” Even “having [a coach] paid for, taken care of, not having to do for myself” helped make the learning application easier.

Efficient Learning

Access to information for program commitments, tasks and planning was often identified as important to participants. Most interviewees reported their programs were “well-organized”, yet communication was inadequate and inefficient. Programs were designed without “the busy working learner in mind.”

Participants appreciated “easy-to-use” communications that made information and learning easier to access, use or follow. For example, one participant mentioned the benefit of a “single email with five calendars in it. We had to double click and save it.” Others wanted a mobile logistics application “because [course instructors] send you so much paper telling you how to get to campus and things like that.” Some expressed a desire to use technologies other than email such as DropBox, Whatsapp, and “Google Groups [sic]” to avoid a lot of emails “going through their work accounts.” In summary, participants wanted simple and efficient access to program instructions in order to understand and manage course requirements in the midst of their other responsibilities.

According to the interviewees, few institutions used digital program platforms to facilitate their program experience. Most learning designs left managing content and communication flow to participants. Consequently, interviewees mentioned reverting to technology that they knew how to use to meet their immediate need as well as challenges with administrative tasks.

Beyond improved communication, participants were also interested in more efficient learning modes. Removal of some of the obstacles was received well by program participants and helped them overcome some of the inefficiencies. Technology was used to do so in some, but not all, cases. Although there was no consensus on specific technology used, email, teleconference and webinar/WebEx were most frequently mentioned. Some liked keeping it simple; for them, “Conference and audio was best option. We tried video once and it did not work.”

Several participants supported the notion of adding more task-oriented tools to help integrate their learning activities into their work. For example, task management and reminders were mentioned repeatedly as ways to simplify the learning process. Participants suggested task oriented tools such as “Any.do” to help remove incremental administrative work and “Google Share” or “Google Slides” to support collaboration activities. They felt tools such as these improved their ability to integrate incremental tasks with their daily work responsibilities.

Finally, when used, the general technological experience with blended programs was mixed. Generally, the technology used was relatively “user friendly” created “few frustrations”. One participant revealed that the benchmark for their school experience was their own organization. “[The school’s tech support was] very good back there, much better than ours.”

However, according to the interviewees while technology had improved there was still room for doing better. Access and engagement required too much extra effort. Platforms and simple technical tools would have simplified or reduced unnecessary work. Given the pressures and time constraints individual participants have, anything that made the process “plug and play” was valued by participants.

Help Me Balance Work, Learning and Life

Despite the popular notion among organizations and some participants that learning should be embedded in work, several commented on having to choose between learning and work. As indicated by one interviewee, “People get busy and have other things to do. If there is something you need to cancel, [the learning program] is going to be the thing.”

Few understood all they were getting into. Most of the interviewees had participated in development programs and used technology at work, but the workload still took them by surprise. The blended programs were tied to their work more than a typical open program. Many “didn’t fully appreciate how much time the project work was going to take and the impact it would have” on their professional and personal lives. Although, they would not have “changed anything”, “knowing in advance would have been good.”

Most interviewees had to find marginal times to do the work. Many “spent weekends and extra time to get [course requirements] done.” One person even mentioned a peer canceling his honeymoon because of the timing and importance of the program. The “struggle” to balance the demands was difficult for participants. They were not executives who simply had to manage their own schedule; they had to find ways to deal with the complexities of matrixed organisations, their various spontaneous and standing meetings while trying balance work with life.

In this context, participants commented on how inaccurate and incomplete program information hindered their ability to be effective learners. All programs included some form of introduction and description of expectations, but several interviewees said the information was incomplete and insufficient. Logistics and advance information were very important to some and commented on by most. Participants needed complete schedule information, not partial, to prepare for their participation. Those who did not have enough information experienced significant difficulties. One interviewee heard from colleagues “who had to travel for some of their responsibilities [that they found managing the learning process] difficult because they did not get the entire year’s plan.” Advanced planning challenges were most pronounced for those with client-facing or professional services roles.

Flexibility was another key need interviewees expressed to help balance the conflicting demands. Many recognized technology as the logical solution to some of these challenges. For most interviewees, technology “definitely made [the learning] easier.” Others mentioned appreciating that if they were not “able to attend a particular session, the recording was made available the next day” and that “weekly reminder emails...were very handy.”

Improving the Design of Blended Programs

The previous section describes in great detail the beliefs held by the study’s participants in relation to the blended learning experiences they took part in. These beliefs have to do with either specific elements of a program (explicit beliefs), or the overall learning experience (implicit beliefs). By examining these insights, it is our hope that designers will be able to better evaluate the learner-centricity of their programs. And as a result of this evaluation, tailor their respective design choices.

To aid in this process, we have summarized below the key insights related to these beliefs, both implicit and explicit. These insights are not to be seen as design recommendations per say. Rather, they reflect the opinions collected. Based on these, learning experience designers can ask more informed design questions and seek more focused information from their customers, to in turn make better design decisions.

Summary of Insights Related to Program Elements

Coaching & Mentoring

1. Coaching was one of the most meaningful development elements for participants and significantly impacted the perception of their overall experience. Those who were well matched liked it; those who were mismatched did not but expected they would have.

2. Participants judged the quality of the coaching by the effectiveness of the coach/coachee matching process, level of manager involvement, duration of coaching sessions and type of coaching model used (e.g. one-to-one, group, clusters).
3. Psychometrics were useful as reflective tools for developing self-awareness and serving as the basis for coaching insights. MBTI, Birkman and 360 feedback were used most often.
4. Managers were not involved in most coaching processes, but when they were interviewees viewed the practice positively.
5. Many interviewees continued using their respective coaching activity far beyond the end of their program.

Projects

6. Both personal and organizational projects were meaningful and desirable to interviewees.
7. Project effectiveness depended on the subject selection (whether they were enough of a “stretch” and relevant to the person) and the level of support given (sponsor, stakeholders, Program Director involvement).

Individual Assignments

8. Participants seemed most dissatisfied with program pre-work, due to the volume of work required, inconsistent completion by classmates and subsequent repetition of the pre-work.
9. Aid memoires such as workbooks, journals, templates and examples were received well and helped guide learners’ efficiency and effective completion of the tasks.
10. Participants appreciated opportunities for varying the level of intensity of learning experiences, based on their individual interests, motivations and capacity.

Content Sessions

11. Participants appreciated new insights and content, but also considered an engaging and entertaining style as essential to helping them stay focused and pay attention.
12. Quality of sessions also depended on the way peer interactions were structured (plenary, small group, triads, pairs, role-plays, etc.), both online and offline.
13. Preference for length and frequency of online and face-to-face sessions varied, but overall, shorter was better.
14. Interviewees recognized and appreciated thoughtful matching of session content with delivery mode. This applied to both in-person as well as online session content.
15. Participants wanted designers to avoid over-stuffing the number of sessions in a day, and allow time for meaningful content discussion with their peers.

Networking

16. Participants wanted more information before and after the program to ensure they could make the most of their peer-relationships, both in- and outside of participants’ organizations.
17. Preference for social media varied, but most participants expressed a desire to use it for supporting relationship building, connections and collaboration, before, during and after their blended learning experiences.

Follow-up

18. When provided, interviewees appreciated support for peer-to-peer interactions after their formal programs finished.

19. Follow-up activities ranged from peer-to-peer interactions to additional support (e.g. coaching, webinars, peer-learning groups, booster shots, personal development plans.)
20. Participants reported that follow-up activity was left up to participants for the most part and identified opportunities for improving program impact through some form of continued contact.

Summary of Insights Related to Program Experience

Searching for Meaning

1. Interviewees desired more, and simpler information prior to the program - to understand the reasons behind their selection, to develop working level relationships with their learning peers, and to better understand the program expectations.
2. Many suggested incorporating more formal, more informative kickoffs to communicate the context and key success factors to participants (e.g. linking program elements to organizational and individual needs; critical success factors for process regarding projects, coaches and learning; blended learning process and methodology explanations.)

Desire to Learn More than Just Business

3. Interviewees valued experiences that helped them develop insights into their business, their organization as well as their organization's strategic picture.
4. In addition to learning about themselves, participants appreciated lessons they could use in their personal lives as well as at work. They found value in concepts or lessons that had longevity and meaning for them as people.
5. Interviewees also treasured practical insights into new communications tools and influencing skills useful for building, developing and maintaining a strong network of relationships.
6. Many participants saw value in using more technology to accomplish these goals, including various forms of communications and media.

Preference for Designs that are Fit-for-Purpose

7. Participants realized the importance of learning design; i.e. the right mode and the right methodology to achieve the sought learning outcome.
8. More specifically, the appropriateness of online and offline for different types of content or learning process was particularly appreciated by participants.

Learning a New Way to Learn

9. Interviewees had different levels of proficiency with learning and blended learning skills.
10. Participants acknowledged their limited familiarity with learning using technology.
11. More generally, participants viewed "learning" as a core skill to be developed (e.g. "how to learn best" both off- and online; how to use new social learning tools.)
12. Learning tools to be effective at "remote" learning (i.e. learning journals with prompts, task reminders, etc.) were also important to the experience.
13. Needed to integrate practical work habits and consideration of commitments to other work colleagues into learning process (e.g. group formats, time allocation, session design and scheduling.)

Making it Easy to Experience the Learning

14. Participants needed hassle-free access and engagement with the learning experience activities.

15. Extra effort required to do redundant or non-value added administrative work was viewed as a waste of time and increased feelings of being overwhelmed or less effective at balancing work and learning.
16. Interviewees expected a platform (or as few tools as necessary) to simplify and consolidate skill building using tools that build good learning habits.
17. Interviewees also desired follow-up activities, to keep them on-track so as to get their “homework” done (reminders, different forms of on-going support, etc.).

In conclusion, as in many cases a good evaluation of current practice depends on the ability to ask the right questions. We hope these insights help prompt these questions. Ourselves being program designers, several questions have occurred to us in the course of our analysis of the data:

- Have we communicated to participants the meaning of their involvement in the program, and how this experience relates to them and their organization?
- Is this design choice the best match for the range of our group’s learning needs?
- Do participants know how to use the process / tools / practices we’ve selected for this experience?
- Are we collectively making engaging in the learning experience as easy as possible for our participants?

Of course, as any study, this one does not imply right or wrong answers. Indeed, in some cases there is tension between participants’ preferences, and some preferences mentioned may even be mutually exclusive. Nevertheless, we hope it serves its purpose - to act as both an aid and a stimulus, in helping designers appreciate learners’ perceptions of blended learning and reflect on ways to act upon these. As such, we hope its effect will be to remind learning experience designers of the learner, an oft forgotten point of view ,when considering blended program design choices.

Possible Future States: the Author’s Perspectives

Insights from this study are useful, but they are only another step in our journey as learning and development professionals to create more impactful and customer-centric learning experiences. As expected, results from this study highlight “low hanging” fruit and provide several questions to help us take another step forward. In this section, we consider the implications of the results of the study, in terms of the possible future states available to learning institutions if we were to take even bigger steps toward enhancing the blended learning experiences we deliver. The following opportunities are the opinions of the report’s authors’, who have interpreted data from the study through the lense of their respective executive education experience. The opinions expressed here are not the opinions of UNICON.

Wake-up, You Learning Experience Designer!

by Giuseppe Auricchio

The topic of digital transformation is on every manager’s mind. At this point, it is obvious to most that digitalization is having a deep, transformative effect on businesses in all industries. Whether one looks at manufacturing or services, the changes brought about by digitalization are increasingly visible.

The untrained eye would associate these changes with the “shiny new tools” that are being used in these diverse contexts. Today, however, digitalization is about much more than these tools. While impressive and essential, what is most interesting about new technologies is the opportunities they are collectively enabling.

As a result of the rapid diffusion of digital technologies, a “digital fabric” has started to permeate diverse facets of our lives. This fabric seamlessly connects people and things in a myriad of combinations. It also allows us to extract data from these connections. Because of these connections and this data, we can interact in completely new ways. From shopping to booking taxis, from watching sports to driving our car – there is no doubt we are engaging in these activities differently today than only a few years ago.

Likewise, there is a growing sense that digitalization can enable a radically different way of learning. This is true both in general, and specifically in the context of executive development. For this promise to come to fruition, I believe learning leaders need to embrace a new mindset. They must abandon their comfortable lives as instructional designers, and embrace the demanding yet full of promise profession of the learning experience designer.

The findings from this study suggest that those responsible for the design of executive development programs are competent instructional designers. Indeed, one can infer from stories told by interviewees that they leverage their school’s resources and core competencies to conceive their programs. And, as reported by the interviewees, by and large these programs are good – sometimes excellent.

What is somewhat striking is the little variance in design across programs. As our study has found, the ways in which designers sequence modes (in-person learning and distance learning) is fairly consistent. Their use of methodologies is equally similar; the most popular learning processes can be counted on a single hand. Should one, therefore, deduce that the strengths and capabilities of all schools are essentially identical? And that the practice of designing an executive program has evolved into a near-exact science, as a result of fine-tuning over time?

From the data collected, that certainly appears to be the argument a learning leader would make. Passionate and professional, these individuals love what they do, have become good at it and are successful because of that. As a result, they stay close to what they do best, and offer their experience to their customers – i.e. the learners, who benefit from it in the form of “good programs”.

But, as suggested, times are changing. This approach, commonly referred to as inside-out design, is no longer a guarantee of a sustainable future in a world in which all the activities we take part in – including learning, are increasingly being enriched by digital interactions. Ultimately, we have at our disposal new ways to relate to each other and our world, and we want to take advantage of these in all contexts. This is no less true when we are participants in an executive program.

The learning experience designer approaches this challenge in a different way than does the instructional designer. Interestingly, the starting point is actually that same for both; i.e., the design process begins by identifying the learner’s objectives for attending a program. This “purpose” guides subsequent decisions, and to a large extent is not affected by digitalization. Indeed, the outcome an individual seeks from participating in a program is roughly the same today as it has been in years past.

Where the learning experience designer distances themselves from their accomplished colleague is in the way he or she addresses the learner's needs, sometimes referred to in the language of design thinking as "pains". Armed with a powerful toolkit, which includes knowledge and skills in instructional design, educational pedagogy, neuroscience, social sciences, design thinking, and UX, the learning experience designer focuses solely on those needs, and seeks to translate them into solutions which will serve that individual.

The importance of this simple difference becomes apparent when one links it back to the aforementioned effect of digitalization. Digitalization is, in the essence, opening up new ways to meet old needs. In some cases, this means meeting a need that until this point was served one way, in an entirely new way. In others, it involves addressing a need that was previously underserved, and which now can be fulfilled.

The only way to capture this extraordinary opportunity is to adopt the outside-in approach that distinguishes a learning experience designer. Instructional designers map available solutions (i.e. what they know and/or do well) to the learner's purpose. Learning experience designers see the learner's needs as a source of inspiration for new approaches. Needs are mapped along the learning journey – i.e., the sequence of steps the learner must go through to fulfill their learning objectives. And each step of the journey, or interaction point, is then examined – with the key question being "what is the best way to address what is important to the learner at that point?"

This approach produces learning experiences that are novel, because it opens the door to leveraging the possibilities of today's connected, data-driven world. Perhaps an example is useful to illustrate its potential. One of the well-known objectives for attending an executive program is to develop a network of peers. Indeed, in both custom as well as open enrollment programs, participants highlight this objective as a key part of the program's value proposition. Until recently, this network was typically established and developed mostly during face-to-face time. In part, this was justified by the fact that face-to-face interactions are uniquely suited to building relationships. That may be true, but... can we break this objective down into needs, and address these in a different way today, with the tools at our disposal?

The needs associated with network building are varied. First, at the very start of the journey, participants are curious to find out more about each other – basic information about work, nationality, family, interests, etc. During the journey, they seek data about how the network is developing; who they have met, who the influencers are, who can provide them with useful resources, etc. Following its completion, they are anxious about maintaining the relationships they have established.

I find it troubling that our research did not uncover a single example of a program meeting these needs holistically. At best, some were addressed poorly. Several interviewees reported not knowing who the fellow participants were until they saw them in the flesh – despite months of online interaction prior to that. None had performed any diagnostic of their existing network, and mapped that to the people in their program – something fairly simple with today's tools. And the best communities following a program's completion we could find were WhatsApp groups started by the initiative of learners – typically unsatisfied with the program administrator's lack of responsiveness to their need!

I believe it is time learning leaders in executive development take action. The world outside of corporate learning is quickly looking ahead to radically new ways of learning. These

views are inspiring, but perhaps still aspirational. I myself described one such vision recently, defining “omni-learning” as a learning experience that is continuous, learner-led and data driven.

Much more attainable is the task of looking at current learning experience with fresh eyes. To do so, we must leave the “product and service box” to occupy the “needs to be served box”. This is challenging for most program designers. One difficulty has to do with the change in mindset it requires, which itself rests on a complex body of knowledge and set of skills. The other has to do with having a methodology to facilitate the brainstorming process.

My suggestion? Start with the objectives, or “jobs to be done”. Ask yourself a familiar, age-old question: “what are the purposes for which learners come to my program?” But resist the temptation to travel down the familiar path of leveraging your know-how to address these objectives. Instead, identify the learner’s “pains”, or needs – “what is most important to the learner, relative to each objective?” And map these need along the learning journey. For each interaction point, force yourself to identify new solutions. I am certain you will uncover exciting opportunities to do things differently.

Leaving it All on the Table: The Need for Holistic Development in Executive Education

by Kati Frazier

This is an interesting time to be a designer of learning experiences for professionals. Our fast-paced, digital environment is throwing something new at us every day. Employees at all levels need tools to clear through the noise, make effective decisions, and engage with others in a way that’s authentic and purpose-driven. Our work worlds and beyond are so incredibly complex. And yet our wiring as human beings has remained the same.

Advances in neuroscience have helped us gain greater insight into how adults learn, how stress impacts our effectiveness, and the strategies individuals can use to optimize their brain function. At the end of the day, though, there are still some basic needs that individuals need to have met in order to engage in learning opportunities and truly grow from them.

As I was reviewing the transcripts, I was asking myself if these basic needs are being addressed in the overall learning architecture of executive education offerings. If you look at the structures outlined in the first section of this paper, you will see that executive education still primarily focuses on the cognitive side of learning. When you think about our line of work from a broader perspective we’re doing a lot more than teaching business fundamentals, we’re helping individuals build the tools to live better lives. Perhaps the biggest opportunity for providers of learning experiences is to look at executive education beyond a cognitive perspective and adopt a more holistic view of learning. Looking at learning from various opportunities – physical, spiritual, socio-emotional – repositions learning as participative rather than passive.

As our transversal view of the data suggests, learners are looking for experiences that go beyond more than just knowledge transfer. Learners are seeking opportunities to engage at a deeper level. So what could a more holistic approach to learning and development look like in executive education?

Start with the Basics

Malcolm Knowles established the principles for andragogy over sixty years ago. When you observe the patterns in the program structures, most of what these principles advocate for are missing. In his book *Informal Adult Education*, published in 1950, he advises:

Adults should acquire a mature understanding of themselves. They should understand their needs, motivations, interests, capacities, and goals. They should be able to look at themselves objectively and maturely. They should accept themselves and respect themselves for what they are, while striving earnestly to become better.

Adults should develop an attitude of acceptance, love, and respect toward others. This is the attitude on which all human relations depend. Adults must learn to distinguish between people and ideas, and to challenge ideas without threatening people. Ideally, this attitude will go beyond acceptance, love, and respect, to empathy and the sincere desire to help others.

Adults should develop a dynamic attitude toward life. They should accept the fact of change and should think of themselves as always changing. They should acquire the habit of looking at every experience as an opportunity to learn and should become skillful in learning from it.

Adults should learn to react to the causes, not the symptoms, of behavior. Solutions to problems lie in their causes, not in their symptoms. We have learned to apply this lesson in the physical world, but have yet to learn to apply it in human relations.

Adults should acquire the skills necessary to achieve the potentials of their personalities. Every person has capacities that, if realized, will contribute to the well-being of himself and of society. To achieve these potentials requires skills of many kinds—vocational, social, recreational, civic, artistic, and the like. It should be a goal of education to give each individual those skills necessary for him to make full use of his capacities.

Reaching back in time to draw from some of the fundamental principles of how adults learn allows us to revive how we pair our fundamental wiring as adults with the unique demands and challenges of today. If you're questioning where to start with developing a more holistic approach to your program designs, integrating a few of Knowles' principles would be a good place to start.

Engage the mind... and the heart... and the body

Let's start with the heart. In 1915, the Scottish philosopher, Thomas Carlyle, famously wrote: "A loving heart is the beginning of all knowledge." And yet – as our research surfaces – there remains a detachment between the cognitive side of learning, and the more holistic and emotional side of learning. Attempting to learn while keeping emotions at arms' length results in a disjointed experience for the learner. An unintended consequence of this is not getting fully involved in the learning. Where is the real impact in that scenario? The best way to engage the heart of the learner in executive education is to start by helping them better understand themselves as leaders – what their core drivers and blockers are. And engage them in a conversation about purpose. Why are they here? How will this experience help get them to where they want to be?

And now the mind. A knowledge transfer approach to building programs is no longer enough. Our complex, knotty environment demands more of us. Many of our clients come to us asking for help with developing new mindsets and behaviors. This will only come about if a more mindful practice is integrated into your approach. A very simple way to engage the mind beyond knowledge transfer is to incorporate more mindfulness and reflection practices into your offerings. Teaching the tools of presence, stress management, and awareness without judgment can build more fertile ground for a growth mindset – the starting place for learning.

Finally, the body. Learners need the opportunity to practice, play and try out new approaches in order to broaden their current perspectives and shift behaviors. As Professor Tammy Frieler notes in (insert research paper reference), “Approaches to learning through the body are emerging in broad, innovative, integrated ways of knowing in resonance with andragogy as follows; they are participative rather than passive; they provide adult learners with alternate opportunities for knowing that are situated not just in their own comfort zones but also in gentle risks and challenges that facilitate new knowledge from previous knowledge: and they account for life experiences of adult learners.”

Acknowledging the whole being as a part of the learning process creates pathways to integrated learning. Some approaches for getting the body involved include the following: Providing learners time for mindful stretching; time for practicing new behaviors in a supported environment; and time for playing in ways that ignites creativity and new perspectives. Even just time for mindful breathing is a step in the right direction.

An open mind, an engaged heart, and a resilient body are the foundation of an individual who thrives within complexity. Taking the whole human being into consideration when developing an executive education offering will not only help us be better learning designers, it will also ultimately help our clients build a cadre of leaders who have the tool set to remain effective in today’s noisy, busy world. An open mind, an engaged heart, and a resilient body are the foundation of an individual who thrives within complexity.

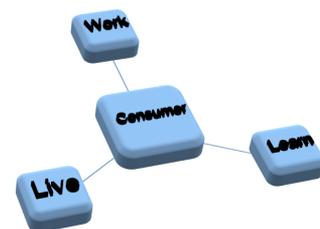
The Age of Smart Learning

by JoEllyn Prouty McLaren

Changes in the consumerization of technology, the evolution of connected devices and the prevalence of applications have altered the way we interact at work, and while learning. On the surface, these forces appear to be aligned, but, simply following the innovators’ shift from a focus on products and services to a focus on how consumers use products and services will not alone guarantee successful blended learning. Constant change requires constant learning; constant learning requires a smarter way to learn, one that leverages the way we work in the way we learn and vice versa. As L&D professionals we must design courses that help learners leverage the range of appropriate options more effectively.

As a result of our new tech savvy life, we are influencing and consumerizing our organizations, our work and our approach to learning.

We see technological influence on two levels, the individual and the organization. We are using technology more than ever in our daily lives. We are also taking it to work. In 2014, Gartner reported that 40% of U.S. consumers worked for large organizations admitted using personal devices for work purposes. Technology and application providers have responded to this shift. Tablets, phones and applications are ubiquitous. Consequently, we engage in our work lives differently now.



We have begun to use technology to work *smarter*, not *harder*. Working smarter has catalyzed organizational changes. Remote working, global team projects and job sharing are common now. Both employers and employees want flexibility. In short, technology has changed

our organizational practices and structures, and in turn, we have changed the way get work done by using technology. We are becoming *smart workers*.

Yet, our needs don't stop here. We have too many demands, too much information, too much to learn everyday if we are to stay relevant. Organizations are encouraging, if not insisting, we take responsibility for our own learning and development.

In my own employer brand gap research, data showed how our past working experiences could profoundly influence our current expectations of our workplace, our employers and in fact our development needs. Similarly, if we, as individual consumers of technology, expose ourselves to different ways of doing things, our knowledge of what is possible from these personal and work experiences will bleed over and affect our expectations of our learning experiences.

To adapt to the ongoing changes, we need to *learn smarter*. In fact, at this rate of change, learning smarter is essential. If we are to stay relevant, we need to embrace *smart learning*.

What is smart learning?

By *smart learning* I mean learning that is learner-centric, that meets the learner where they are physically, emotionally, professionally and intellectually. It is a skill and a discipline. It's continuous, not an intervention outside of work. It's flexible and on-demand because it is enabled by tools that are fit for purpose and that simplify learning and overcome behavioral change obstacles. It goes deep to achieve double-loop learning, modifying our mental models in light of our experiences. Smart learning reflects our social working practices because it is the foundation on which we build our collaborative learning culture.

Smart Learning Characteristics
Learner-centric
Disciplined
On-demand
Flexible
Fit for purpose
Simplifying the process
Embedded in working practices
Collaborative & Social

Our study indicated that our current learning design approach has made significant progress. We are using blended learning designs in organization that were previously unwilling to use it for fear of being cheap, impersonal and ineffective.

Despite a few interviewees having raised these concerns, those who experienced the blended learning for the first time liked it.

Our interviewees' positive experience provides an insight into the ways consumerization of technology and learning are shifting our learning experiences, and therefore, expectations at the organizational and individual levels. At the organizational level, our traditional means of taking people out of work to learn is too expensive, too slow and too complicated for global businesses that want to build a learning discipline. At the individual level, while in-person learning was liked and in some cases even preferred, reliance on in-person learning was too top-down, too inflexible and too generic. As explained by one interviewee, *smart learners* "want information relevant, fast, and customized." To our blended learning interviewees, "technology definitely made [the learning experience] easier. Being able to go online and grab articles, to do the assessments online and then have somebody have the results definitely helped."

Our findings also suggested that as learning leaders, we have not yet seized the opportunity afforded by a consumerized learning world. If we must learn constantly to stay relevant, learning must be part of our jobs. If we, as learning designers, also know that the best application of learning for adults occurs when the learning is situated in the job, why aren't we

integrating more *smart learning* practices into our program designs instead of the commonly used ones such as projects, webex and coaching?

What concerns, but does not surprise me, is our natural tendency to rely on formal, traditional classroom learning practices to provide formal time, space and support for our interviewees' learning experience. Results from our study clearly indicate that 1) although we have all been learning our whole lives, our familiarity with the learning process varies, and 2) we all need help learning how to use these new digital learning tools to enable smart learning.

Do executives want *smart learning*?

Interviewees were "up for it." Although most reported their experiences as "well organized", interviewees suggested several opportunities for improving the learning experience further. Despite not knowing precisely how it could have been achieved, they offered solutions and even speculated on platforms, applications and tools that could help them collaborate by connecting them with their peers, their colleagues, their work and even their learning. This is supported by a 2011 article, in CLO Magazine that reported that 30 – 65% of workers were meeting their learning needs by working around learning and development departments and organizations. It seems the message to "take ownership of one's learning and development" has been received, loud and clear.

Learners will not wait for us. Work is more collaborative and demanding than ever, and if learning is to be done in the work, it must be collaborative and easy to integrate. But, we have not worked or learned this way in the past; therefore, as learning designers we have an opportunity to reimagine our role as accelerators of the transition to *smart learning*.

Our new *smart learning designer* roles

Surely, the blurring of the lines between work, life and learning is great, right? After all, it is what we have been professing all along. Well, like many complex issues, *smart learning* is simple, but not easy, so let me offer four principles to help us redefine our roles in this brave new world.

Move away from designing learning events and move to enabling constant learning. We should reject the idea of learning as a bolt-on and something one must go away to do. Individuals realize they have powerful tools at hand to solve work and learning problems without stepping out of the workflow. Or, in the words of Nick Shackleton-Jones, former Director of Online Learning for BP, we need to move from "courses to resources". We need to use the new, and often free, tools to help *smart workers* bring *smart learning* into their everyday lives, not just while on training programs.

Enable learning to reflect the social aspects of our work. The very acts of working and learning are social. As *smart learning* designers we should encourage and cultivate collaboration and community in everything our learners experience. We need to recognize that content is no longer king, rather each one of us coupled with our networks - the people, the consumers - are king and queen!

Help executives learn to use *smart learning* tools. Executives in our study indicated their mindsets are shifting, but that they are not fluent in learning methods or tools. For example, group learning was used primarily for large breakouts, project work and peer coaching, yet, only one program taught participants how to peer coach. Several participants reported they did not have the knowledge or skills to suggest the best tools for their blended activities, so they defaulted to the easiest one. Yet, most learning

designers left the learning process and support decision to participants for both traditional and blended learning. We should identify these knowledge, tool and skill gaps and fill them by teaching the best ways to learn.

Build learning cultures to embed the skill and discipline of deep learning into our colleagues' everyday jobs and practices. If we embrace our role in teaching the learning process and foster collaborative working and learning, we can improve the performance of every learner we encounter as well as the organizations we serve.

As learning designers, we have a new role to play in the learner-driven world of learning. By centering our research, designs and our roles around the people instead of the content, we can create the critical mass of *smart learning* professionals that will drive our organizations to new heights and help us unleash our latent potential like never before.