

Case Study – ‘Blended Learning’

Brief

Blended learning offers humanitarian organisations a cost-effective way of providing greater access to capacity strengthening. The widespread use of online platforms has inspired innovative approaches to learning, resulting in more engaged learner communities and the extension of learner-directed programmes.

This case study reflects on examples from the sector taken from material in the public arena, interviews with learning specialists and published work, and presents the challenges and opportunities the future will bring.

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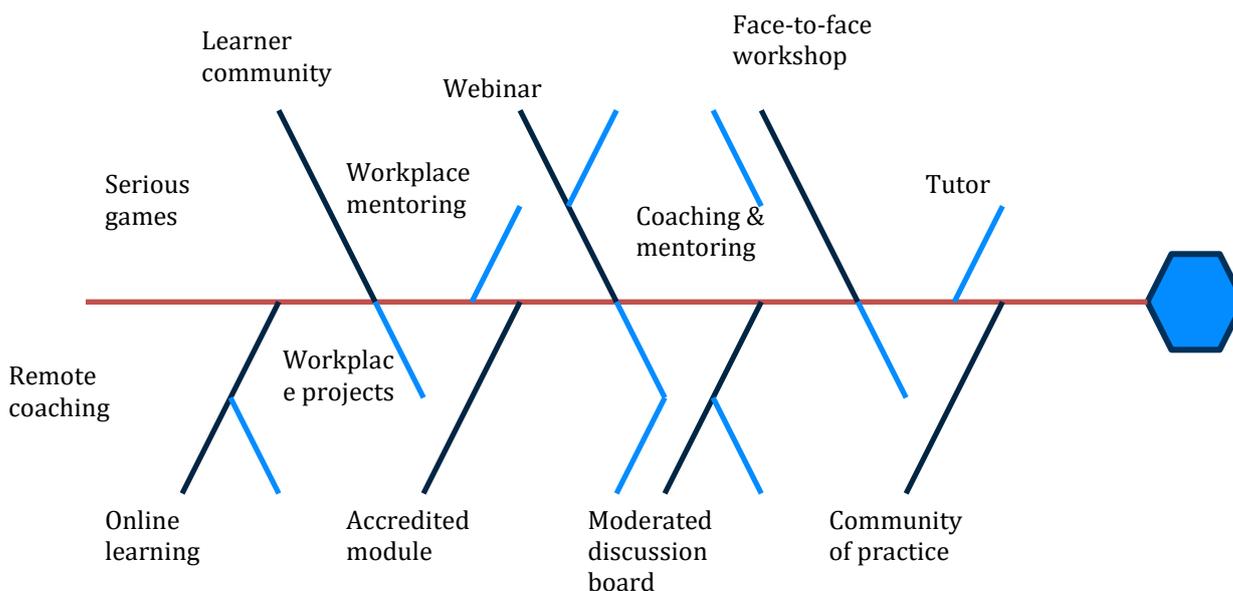
Introduction

This case study focuses on blended learning and the important role it plays in humanitarian capacity development. The case study highlights examples of innovation and excellence and describes the impact blended learning has.

What is blended learning?

Both flexible and rigid definitions of blended learning exist, but for the purposes of this case study, we take blended learning to mean 'learning that integrates face-to-face content delivery with an e-learning component that comprises complementary (not identical) content'. In an age of technologically well-supported classroom settings, blended learning also offers an element of learner-directed study where at least part of the content is traversed at a speed and complexity either partially or fully chosen by the learner themselves.

Blended learning offers a far richer learning experience than leaving the learner to browse a curated library of online resources, and then attend a training course. An effective and well-integrated e-learning component invites the learner into evaluation, synthesis and application of their learning in a relevant context, while the face-to-face learning environment can support the interpretation of learned content into working knowledge, applied according to the values and mission of their specific employing organisation. Blended learning also maximises the opportunities for participant interactions with each other as well as with the trainer/s or facilitator/s. Many training providers offering blended learning solutions stress the importance of interaction between participants - peer learning and peer networking - to enrich the learning environment, and this approach actively draws in the expertise and experience of the learner cohort to enhance the learning programme¹. Among humanitarian organisations, it is this learner engagement which is seen as key to the success of a blended learning solution; it sets a course for greater organisational cohesion and stronger networks as relationships are formed early in the programme and maintained long after the formal programme is completed.



What does 'Blended Learning' include?

Increasing participation

Many organisations offer blended learning programmes to their staff and/or volunteers, and most training providers have adapted their portfolio of learning solutions to offer blended learning programmes. For the time being, it is the larger organisations that are able to afford and offer blended learning programmes:

- UN agencies such as UNHCR and UNICEF, the UNSSC and ITCILO
- The Red Cross and Red Crescent movement, including IFRC, the American Red Cross, British Red Cross, ICRC.
- INGOs such as Oxfam, Save the Children, World Vision, the IRC, MSF, ActionAid
- Networks such as ICVA, the CHS Alliance, and the Start Network
- The Sphere project

Over the last few years most leadership and management development programmes have been developed as a blended learning solution, as well as some of the technical training such as training on Sphere standards. However, increasingly, many organisations see blended learning as a way of broadening the reach of capacity strengthening investment across their organisations and are implementing blended solutions for frontline staff in remote locations as well as for partner organisations.

Organisations with a very geographically dispersed workforce have seen the positive impact blended learning has: back in 2014, the IFRC described the enhanced scale and reach that online learning offered, estimating that capacity strengthening interventions were being accessed by twice as many staff than had been able to join traditional learning events, and they found that they were able to reach partners and volunteers much more effectively². In many respects blended learning programs, especially ones that incorporate a strong digital component, are contributing towards the 'democratisation of learning', that is to say enabling NGOs to dramatically increase the number of training courses available for national staff and partner organisations and helping them reach staff that previously would not have had any significant training investment.

Learner communities

Leveraging of learner communities is the key to successful blended learning solutions, achieved through social learning and sharing of user-generated content, says Emmanuelle Lacroix, Partnership Development Manager at Cornerstone OnDemand Foundation. This supports the creation of a "cohort of learners [who]... build relationships from the start across teams. Engagement is one of our key focus areas, as this is a factor that will attest to the success (or lack of) of your learning intervention." She sees blended learning as a crucial piece of the capacity-strengthening jigsaw: "As our operating contexts get more and more challenging, bringing other learning offers than the classroom-based one is a widely accepted essential."

Outside the humanitarian sector, some studies have shown a statistically significant correlation between the academic performance of students, and the level of activity on the online platform (e.g. number of online files viewed and online discussion messages posted on the course message board), supporting the idea that high engagement on the online platform is an indicator for positive programme outcomes³.

² <http://www.ifrc.org/en/get-involved/learning-education-training/learning-case-studies/mexican-red-cross---video-67323/>

³

Re-designing a learning programme to incorporate a blended learning approach

UNOCHA Humanitarian Field Co-ordination Programme

Blended Learning Purpose: training and onboarding/induction

Genesis of programme: Following an independent evaluation of their existing programme, UNOCHA partnered with DisasterReady to support more effective use of technology in engaging staff through interaction early in the programme.

Features of the blended learning programme:

- Tutor-facilitated collaborative online course covering key policies, operational frameworks and tools
- Multimedia online learning resources
- Community of learners (sharing assignments, moderated discussions, peer feedback)
- On-site workshop (using a participatory approach)
- Development project (application of learning in the workplace, with online interactive groups)

How has the re-designed programme made a difference?

- Workshop facilitators for Phase 2 (face-to-face) were also online moderators in Phase 1, enabling them to establishing relationships with participants prior to the face-to-face component
- Levels of participant interaction and networking are high from the early stages. This has had an influence on the wider organisation in terms of the culture shift towards learning
- Creating a robust learning community in the initial phase was recognized by participants as 'one of the most rewarding aspects of the programme'. It laid the foundations for an 'efficient' start to Phase 2 of the programme and has now led to plans to build a community of practice that will contribute to deepening the wider organisation's culture of learning and engagement as well as offering participants post-course support. As the course has engaged staff across 22 countries, appreciation and awareness of local programmes across the organisation is positively influenced
- Using a high-quality online platform enables a wide range of learning objects to be accessed (e.g. courses, videos, written materials, online feedback groups, webinars), which increases active participation.

Blended learning for management skills

UNHCR Conflict Management Blended Learning Programme

Blended Learning Purpose: Self-management and capacity development for conflict prevention, management and resolution

Overview of programme: UNHCR used an internal platform 'Learn&Connect' to host this conflict management course (and other courses). The Conflict Management course offers spaces to staff to participate in a 16 hour program comprising multiple learning elements:

- Webinars: 3 x 1.5 h (for up to 25 participants)
- Elearning modules: 5 h
- Distance learning activity: 5.5

Participants are guided towards a successful structure for their studies but are encouraged to follow the programme at their own rhythm and taking into account their personal learning style.

Features of the blended learning programme:

- A variety of pedagogical methods, resources and modes of web-based technology are used, including text, video, audio, webinars etc.
- Multiple opportunities for collaborative learning through participation in e.g. community discussion, online role-play, offer the opportunity for connection across the organisational

- community, in spite of being geographically widespread
- Guided and supported by a specialized tutoring team who provide feedback on assignments
- Written guide acts as a handbook and 'learning map' with clear learning and development objectives
- Course structured to promote participants using their learning in real-time at work
- E-Learning evaluations and assignment to demonstrate learning.

Making learning more accessible

Broadening access to learning is a chief catalyst for adopting a blended learning approach. A key part of the programs LINGOs⁴ offer is free technology-based learning and a 'virtual classroom' environment, a resource that is accessible in remote and hard-to-reach locations. The reach of such e-learning components has the potential to be high when provided via the right platform, as it lifts the pressure on face-to-face seminars and workshops to deliver on an entire curriculum. For example, the online PMD Pro course⁵ is taught through a range of free study resources, (videos, assignments, and structured reading as well as access to the learning community and a facilitator). Learner achievements are recognized by a points system and participants can opt to apply for professional certification, which carries a fee. The course is available in 4 languages and runs several times a year, but there is more to accessibility than just proximity - learning specialists in many organisations have embraced blended learning because they see in the range of learning activities an opportunity to cater for different learning styles among the learner cohort.

The challenges of a blended learning approach

Clearly there are some challenges associated with blended learning, though for the most part they relate to the digital/online components. Almost all agencies identify the risks associated with rolling out the online component of blended learning solutions which variously include patchy local connectivity, variable digital literacy and state of organisational readiness (both in terms of up-to-date technology and staff preconceptions and preferences). Nevertheless, proponents are identifying technical work-arounds (see box below) and the appeal to learners of ready access to remote guidance or an expert voice as they progress through e-learning phases, is a motivating factor. Although learning providers are candid about the challenges, none appear to have opted out of blended learning models to return to a solely classroom-based or correspondence-course pedagogy.

Benefits of a blended learning approach

Organisations choose blended solutions increasingly to enhance scale and reach while maintaining some cost efficiencies, particularly in the delivery of the online component. This is likely to achieve the objectives of delivering accessible learning across a wide geography and enabling learners to complete modules flexibly in line with their own timescales. Nevertheless, if insufficient emphasis is put on fully integrating each unit of a blended programme into a comprehensive whole, organisations risk delivering a piecemeal offering, which can be off-putting to participants and is impossible to evaluate! This is the very criticism levelled at blended learning when it is held up as the latest universal panacea for humanitarian learning challenges⁶. A lynchpin for creating an intentional learning journey with measurable indicators of success appears to be the active involvement of the moderator/facilitator in the earliest phase, providing guidance and direction

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⁵ <http://pmdproforward.org>

⁶ <http://redasadki.me/2015/06/14/experience-and-blended-learning-two-heads-of-the-humanitarian-training-chimera/>

even if this is very light-touch. As Christine Amy, Senior Emergency Preparedness Coordinator at The International Rescue Committee describes it: “What we’re doing is creating a climate and a process as much as an end result.” Blended learning cannot be merely a collection of activities bolted together, as Alessandro Napoli, Senior Learning Officer at UNHCR explains: “A properly designed blended approach should ensure that each element of a learning journey builds on the others. Learners should be encouraged to explore the activities in the programme in an iterative way and not as a checklist to be completed to obtain the final certificate.” Many organisations offer a wider range of e-learning modules through internal online platforms, on topics drawn from statutory training, technical skills and management and leadership competencies which staff can freely access to answer their personal development needs. Yet however comprehensive, an online directory of learning resources cannot be equated with the coherent structure of a blended learning programme. The unique and perhaps most valuable opportunity that blended learning provides in the humanitarian context is a guiding presence from the beginning, providing the learner with a sense of accompaniment, and a community built around a shared learning experience. In the frontline aid-worker’s lived reality of remote operations this cannot be underestimated.

Evaluating the benefits of a blended learning programme

Learning from RedR-implemented Context Programmes in Jordan and Kenya, 2016

Blended Learning Purpose: The objective of the programme is that participants put the humanitarian competencies they have learned into practice and make positive changes in their work.

Genesis of programme: The Context Programme is being implemented by RedR UK in Jordan, Lebanon, Kenya and Ethiopia, as part of the Talent Development programme, with support from Oxfam. Within the same programme MzNZ is implementing Context in Bangladesh, and Bioforce in DRC.

‘Compiled by 15 leading humanitarian agencies under the Consortium of British Humanitarian Agencies (CBHA) – now the Start Network - and based on the *Core Humanitarian Competencies Framework*, Context provides a solid basis for staff development for improved humanitarian response.

Context contains two staff development programmes:

- The Management and Leadership Skills Development Programme
- The Core Skills Development Programme

Both aim to increase the capacity for humanitarian leadership and enhance the knowledge and behavioural skills of current personnel whatever their programme area or discipline.’⁸

Features of the blended learning programme:

The Context programmes incorporate a wide variety of learning activities and the following feature in every programme: Face-to-face workshops, coaching, online learning, buddy groups, action plans and learning projects. The programme requires course-specific interaction with the participants’ line manager and ends with a final graduation ceremony.

Evaluation results:⁹

Participants in Jordan

Components participants felt were most useful, were:

- **Coaching:** rated extremely or highly beneficial by 100% of participants
- **Face-to-face workshops (2):** rated extremely or highly beneficial by 80% of participants

⁷ <http://mzninternational.com>

⁸ <http://www.contextproject.org/index.php>

⁹ Evaluation data presented to DEPP Learning Conference: This content is reproduced with the kind permission of Selma Scheewe from the evaluations of Context trainings conducted by RedR UK in Jordan & Kenya. Oxfam leads on Context within the START Network Talent Development Program.

- **Opportunity to network:** rated extremely or highly beneficial by 70% of participants. Still rated as very beneficial were the learning projects and working on action plans. There were very mixed reviews amongst participants regarding the benefit of the support from the line manager, the complementary on-line courses and the buddy groups. Some participants found these components 'extremely beneficial', while others found they have 'no or limited benefit'.

Programme management

Managing the programme demanded a significant investment of time and frequent engagement with participants, coaches and line managers across the 6-9 months that it ran. From these two workshops, the evaluators offered useful reflections:

- Direct participants' focus to the final assignment / reflection and use components like coaching, online learning and buddy groups to support them in achieving the end result.
- Recognise that some components work better for some participants than others, so a variety is important.
- While a line manager may be a key ally in encouraging the participant to implement learning in practice, it cannot be assumed that they will all be able to provide optimal support for the learning programme.
- Although there are significant logistical challenges to matching coaches to participants, it is worthwhile including this very beneficial component of the programme.
- Participants gained mixed results from buddy groups, depending on the motivation, engagement and commitment of the group members. Giving groups a shared goal could enhance the results of this learning modality.

Learners at the centre

From a humanitarian point of view, the concept of learner-centred, learner-directed programmes should appeal. In much the same way as the sector seeks to put people at the centre of humanitarian assistance and places emphasis on the primacy of effective needs assessment, feedback mechanisms and accountability, a blended approach puts the learner at the centre of a high-quality learning experience and would be expected to deliver the best possible outcome.

Allowing learners to tailor programmes to their own needs is a challenge that Bioforce addresses by enabling individual participants to select components and delivery methods based on their learning objectives, the length of time they can commit and their availability. This might take the form of a mixture of classroom activities, practical activities on the field, internship, coaching and the self-directed use of e-tools. Support from coaches and programme co-ordinators adds an element of responsiveness to individual needs. For training delivered for organisations, Bioforce's tailored packages are based on organisation needs and will typically be co-created with the organisation to include a range of learning approaches (face-to-face training, activities mediated through an e-platform (distance learning, e-self learning), and distance coaching)¹⁰. Flexibility exists in real-time in the form of adaptation in response to feedback from participants; changes can be integrated as the programme is rolled out in order to more closely meet participants' needs.

With broad curricula that typically span humanitarian competencies, technical instruction and leadership behaviours, organisations incorporate diverse learning modalities such as self-directed study, simulations, on-the-job learning, tests, games, action learning sets, coaching, reflective practice and supervision within blended learning programmes. This further increases the range of learning styles that the programme can engage, and creates space for flexibility. Again, blended programmes act as an enabler for learning directors to match content to the most appropriate instructional modalities and thereby answer to a range of learning preferences.

¹⁰ <http://humanitaire.institutbioforce.fr/en#a>

Results for learners through blended programs

“In our experience, a blended learning program achieves better results than regular training programs. One of the main reasons for this is that there are more opportunities for learners to connect with professional activities and to work according to their own rhythm.”

Céline Trublin, Head of Learning & Development at Bioforce

Curating a blended learning programme

International Rescue Committee (IRC) Country Emergency Teams (CETs)

Blended Learning Purpose: Team induction, local capacity-strengthening

Genesis of programme: Across 2015-2016 IRC has implemented in-country capacity strengthening programmes for rapid emergency response, creating in-country teams of emergency responders who are able to mobilise rapidly.

Features of the blended learning programme:

- Collaborative approach to building the local cohort, and interactive learning needs assessment prior to face-to-face component.
- Use of existing online content as a key preparatory element prior to the face-to-face workshops. The content is accessible to local staff in-country via the IRC's own learning portal, increasing the sense of cohesion with the overall programme. Offline versions are circulated to participants in areas where connectivity is variable.
- 2 face-to-face workshops delivered with a strong emphasis on participation and learning-by-doing.
- Capacity Strengthening Plan developed by the CET at the end of the first workshop, including short-, medium- and long-term learning goals of the team, and designed to include a blended mix of learning sources (online, workshops, etc). In most countries the team set themselves the objective of disseminating the learning from the workshops, as part of their plan.
- The content of the workshops incorporates a number of the IRC's Emergency Capacity Strengthening Modules, an internal resource also available to staff as stand-alone units. Post-workshop, the modules have been used individually by CET members to strengthen capacity in their own teams.
- To maintain the learning community and promote sharing of innovation and best practice across the organisation, the newly formed CETs contribute to a regular e-newsletter which features not only their achievements and accounts of local dissemination of learning but also tells the story and the thought-processes of team-members as they apply their skills to local rapid emergency responses. This intervention connects 'newly-graduated' learners across 5 early-uptake countries where CETs have been formed so far and the programme will be implemented in further locations in 2017.

Curating content for a blended learning programme

The IRC's example demonstrates a practice that is current in a number of organisations, including IFRC and RedR¹¹. An informed guide or programme lead gathers content from sources identified for the relevance and quality of their material, and tailors a semi-bespoke programme to the context required. Typically, the participant is directed towards an online course or sharing platform such as Moodle¹², where they meet other participants, complete learning tasks, share their experience and offer feedback, moderated by a facilitator. This is followed by a face-to-face phase that may be bespoke, or drawn from existing materials such as the Context Humanitarian

¹¹ <http://redr.org.uk/en/Training-and-more/tailormade-training/tailormade-case-studies.cfm>

¹² <https://moodle.com>

Staff Development Project. Participants may also be invited to join an online network or community of practice on completion of the face-to-face workshop, with the purpose of continuing to share learning as it is applied in day-to-day work. Outside the structure of an organisation however, it is harder to identify the on-going impact of such programmes and the longevity or otherwise of the post-programme network.

These curated, semi-bespoke packages answer well to the requirement to create a learner community at the outset and set a tone of appreciative inquisitiveness towards the programme as a whole. Less clear is whether the learner has the driving seat when it comes to directing the route and pace of study, which may influence both their engagement and their longer-term commitment to any post-programme community. However, their flexibility allows the initial package to develop in response to needs, over time. Gunther Pratz explains: "We will also start a Community of Practice for CET leaders and members in 2017, which will be a closed online community (similar to Facebook) on the new IRC RescueNet intranet and will allow for direct exchange of information and learning with each other, a forum to ask questions, solicit advice, share learning resources and lessons learned, provide support and create a global sense of community."

A new learning platform

Kaya¹³ is the online learning platform of the Humanitarian Leadership Academy. It offers organisations access to a comprehensive online course catalogue across a wide range of humanitarian and professional skills topics, for participants using English, French and Arabic (some materials are also available in Spanish).

Courses are delivered via e-learning, in-person workshops, videos, webinars and resources, and access issues are addressed through a design that accommodates phone, tablet, laptop and PC formats, and support for low bandwidth users, including downloadable content for offline use. In the near future there will also be space for users to upload their own bespoke content to complement the current catalogue, and list their events via the Kaya platform. The objective is to enable learning providers and their colleagues to use Kaya as a single location for accessing and communicating their learning events.

As an enabler for these developments, an entry-level authoring tool is planned, that can be used to create simple e-learning content to smooth the transitions between different elements of a blended programme. To support learning specialists in shaping online and blended packages to meet their organisational requirements, additional content and resources on digital literacy and learning design are in development.

Evaluating outcomes of blended learning

With a vast range of design models, comparing like with like in order to evaluate the outcomes and impact of blended learning presents a challenge. What can be said is that implementing organisations are enthusiastically exploiting the possibilities presented by blended packages, and are serious about using participant feedback to refine their offer. Blended learning programmes to date have relied heavily on self-assessment although there are various initiatives working to credentialise or accredit blended learning programmes and offer assessment and certification to learners.

¹³ <https://kayaconnect.org/?lang=en>

Enabling the application of learning

“Providing the best possible learning to humanitarian staff is only one side of the coin. We also need to invest in the structures and systems within the organisation, which enable and empower people to apply their learning for impact.”

Dr. Gunther Pratz, Deputy Director Emergency Preparedness, Emergency Unit, The IRC

Contributing to the evaluation of outcomes, The IRC has created a novel structure of monitoring indicators that feed into an Emergency Preparedness Rating score for each country programme. Typically, they are seeing country programmes score significantly higher after the CET capacity strengthening process has been applied.

A further evaluation challenge for the blended learning is the extent to which learners will be able to tailor the 'blend' to suit their personal learning needs, and the knock-on effect this precision would have on evaluating impact. Evaluating the impact of such bespoke programmes typically relies on a robust and effective performance management system, which is usually outside the responsibility of a learning & development practitioner.

What does the future hold?

Learning and development specialists are already looking to a future where intelligent learning platforms offer not only a space where participants can share their learning experiences and provide feedback to one another in real time, but are also able to capture and curate that learning, generating a resource of support and guidance that future users can easily access¹⁴.

A wider adoption of a blended learning approach could be said to require a shift in thinking around learning in the humanitarian sector; a transition towards an 'and:and' mind-set which addresses not only the content of learning programmes but also the optimal way to bring it to the learner in the most accessible form. Success indicators would include progress in the design of demonstrably robust yet easy-access and user-friendly online platforms, which maximise the benefits of interaction between learners, and between learners and facilitators. The extension of technical infrastructure to support access worldwide is essential to full inclusion, and will contribute significantly to the evaluation of learning impact. Central to scaling-up learning in this way will be responding to the challenge of identifying standards of accreditation that all players recognise.

In turn, we anticipate a requirement for all involved in the learning cycle to develop new 'learning-related' competencies. Many of those interviewed for this case-study described as a core competence, the capacity to identify transferrable learning themes and then translate them into a variety of contexts. This is seen as a requirement not just for learners but also for learning designers, managers and supervisors, enabling the maximum benefit to be harnessed from the learning undertaken. The best examples of blended learning solutions also feature high levels of internal coherence, which must be designed into the programme. This requires that the connections between learning activities are designed with as much care as the curated elements. Equally important to learner engagement is the ability to self-direct and tailor their learning programme. Key to achieving this goal is the skill and competence of facilitators, moderators and trainers in being able to confidently navigate the various learning environments whether online or face-to-face, and being able to skilfully support the learning process, according to the objectives of both the programme and the individual.

¹⁴ <http://www.ifrc.org/en/get-involved/learning-education-training/learning-case-studies/british-red-cross--video-67322/>