

Blended Learning Case Study: London School Online

Context

London School Online is part of a group of training companies with the shared purpose of helping people communicate across borders and cultures. We provide eLearning courses, online assessment and virtual classroom training.

Drivers

The opportunity arose to tender for some training with a large, global pharmaceutical organisation who required English language training for their staff. They had tried several approaches to language training, including in country face-to-face sessions but found that take up was poor and the quality of training inconsistent. We proposed that the most effective method to achieve the desired outcomes within the client's budget was a fully blended, multi-year training programme.

This was down to two key drivers: the physical location of the learners, and the extensive nature of the training.

The initial cohort of 70 learners were spread across four countries: Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovenia. 65 employees from Turkey joined the programme at the end of year one, with a further cohort of 30 learners from Romania and Greece in year two. The training had to be scalable, as we anticipated up to 500 learners over the life of the programme.

The client produced language capability requirements for each job position. For example, senior level staff were required to have C1 level of English, whereas more junior positions needed B1 or B2. We then assessed each learner (grammar, vocabulary, speaking and writing) via our online learning platform and mapped their learning journey against the desired level of English required for their position.

The training was scheduled to take place over three trimesters per year, with the assumption being that learners could advance on average by one band approximately every 2-3 trimesters. Once learners achieved their level, they graduated from the programme. For some this took just one trimester, for others it took longer.

What we blended

We blended virtual group training with self-study online materials. Six weeks before the virtual group training commenced, learners were given access to an orientation module on the bespoke London School Online learning platform. Their user accounts already existed from their assessments, and the orientation module allowed them to familiarise themselves with the learning platform ahead of the online classes, as well as allowing us to check that their level assessments were accurate.

The virtual groups ranged in size from six to ten participants, and sessions took place once a week for either 60 or 90 minutes. The shorter sessions were better suited to one territory, while the longer sessions were the norm elsewhere. At the client's request, all virtual training was delivered using WebEx, as this software was already being used company-wide and all course participants had their own accounts.

The London School Online learning platform provided the backbone of the programme, with learners completing ringfenced modules according to their group and level. Our trainers used a mix of content from the learning platform and their own materials in the virtual classes. The platform was the logical choice as the trainers were well-versed in its use, we were able to quickly and easily add learning modules to learner accounts and we could ‘skin’ the platform in the client’s branding and colours. The live reporting tools allowed us – and more importantly the client – to track progress and see how engaged the learners were.

Challenges and how we overcame them

The biggest challenge we faced was around the timing of sessions and how this affected attendance. Sessions were scheduled on Mondays and Fridays, usually first thing in the morning or late in the afternoon. This was to accommodate the field-based nature of the course participants, as the majority were “on the road” from Monday lunchtime until Friday morning. Generally, the Monday morning sessions went without a hitch, but the Friday sessions suffered from erratic attendance.

In parts of central Europe, Friday afternoon is considered part of the weekend, and so the scheduling of classes wasn’t well received. It became clear that individuals hold different views on whether eLearning should be done inside or outside work hours, as well as on what being ‘on time’ means. The client was keen to stress to employees that the programme was voluntary, which led to very poor attendance on Friday afternoons.

Sessions were recorded and shared with participants, meaning that lessons could be accessed and digested by those who were unable to attend. However, improving “live” attendance remained the priority, and we went through a few schedule changes before we were able to find session times that worked. For us, this meant delivering sessions from 6am UK time as we had to allow for time differences of up to +3 hours. It caught us out when the clocks changed in the UK in the Spring of 2018, but not in all the territories we were delivering training in. For some learners this meant that their sessions began an hour later than they were expecting!

Another challenge was around the pace of improvement and that there was no single end date for all learners. As everyone had their own level attainment goal, some would “graduate” from the programme more quickly than others. This led to challenges of keeping those who were improving at a slower pace, or who had a higher level to attain, motivated. Again, poor attendance was compounding the issue, so we worked with the client on how to position the benefits of the programme, to encourage full participation, document the learning journey and to celebrate successes and milestones.

There were several more minor challenges which were more straightforward to deal with. For example, one group of participants initially went to the office for training as they hadn’t digested the fact that the training was digital. This led to eight participants sitting around a laptop for their first session while the trainer delivered the session. The subsequent sessions were much more productive as each learner knew to log in on a separate machine.

Benefits

The main benefit of adopting a blended learning approach for this client was being able to deliver training at times that suited the client’s work patterns, and to allow learners to access their learning whenever and wherever. It also enabled us to deliver a consistent training programme across multiple regions. There was a clear improvement in the language level of the organisation after the first year of training, with 15 of the initial cohort of 47 achieving their language goals and graduating from the programme.

By creating groups based on level and not by geographical location, the course had the secondary effect of bringing together employees from different parts of the company and from different regions who would never have otherwise had the opportunity to collaborate.

What we learnt and considerations for the future

The value of really engaging with stakeholders in the planning phase so that the training is relevant and effective across borders. The more you put in at this stage, the better the outcome will be. Be open and transparent around timing and time expectations: when do you roll out, and what is expected of the learner? What are the deadlines and when will the training take place?

How the programme is positioned within the client's company needs to be both top-down and bottom-up. What is the buy-in from Senior Management? How are you selling the benefits? And who can champion the programme within your company?

Finally, be flexible and ready to adapt to find the most effective approach for your organisation. Not all training works the first time around.

Acknowledgement

Many thanks to Andy Johnson, London School Online, for this contribution.
<https://www.londonschool.com/lso>

This additional resource builds on the wealth of practical teaching ideas and shared experience available in *Best Practices for Blended Learning*.

Order your copy at:

www.pavpub.com/best-practices-for-blended-learning/

