The Guide to
Design for Learning

Overcoming Digital Fatigue and Creating Engagement

Introduction

The shift to remote work triggered a massive social and technological experiment as organizations moved quickly to digitize in-person training. The early results of this unprecedented migration are in, and with the benefit of hindsight, learning designers are now figuring out the best way to provide learning experiences that are engaging and deliver meaningful business impact.

At first, video-conferencing looked like the best stand-in for in-person learning—or at least, good enough for emergency purposes. As time has gone on, and the horizon for fully- and partly-remote work has extended, the challenges of using video-conferencing as an easy substitute for in-person have come to the fore. Learners suffer from 'Zoom fatigue' as learning becomes just another meeting in a daily parade of video conferences. Instructors struggle to recreate engaging in-person experiences in an online format. Many are finding that video conferences consume as much energy as in-person without the rewards.

The net result: it is now obvious that replicating face-to-face learning experiences online is more difficult than we thought.

In this e-book, we consider how taking a design approach to learning can inform how and when to use synchronous, asynchronous, and blended online modalities to meet the needs and circumstances of learners, while achieving core learning objectives that are tied to business outcomes.

The disruption to in-person work—and, by extension, in-person learning—is likely to continue into the foreseeable future. But, just as we have found ways to innovate and adapt in how we work, current conditions have presented opportunities to use technology in new ways to learn at work, not just to survive the pandemic, but thrive in the future.

What's Inside

Design for Engagement

Good learning design can overcome digital fatigue and create engagement

Modern approaches to learning design are taking advantage of advances in technology and learning theory, and forcing a rethink of the content, processes, and tools that make up learning experiences.

One of the newer learning design approaches is to purposefully target the perfect mix of synchronous, asynchronous, or blended learning models to promote collaborative learning and drive engagement. While recent experiences with Zoom and other video-conferencing platforms suggest that a purely synchronous approach isn't ideal, this doesn't mean sacrificing the benefits that synchronous learning can offer, nor surrendering to some of the pitfalls of asynchronous learning that are traditionally associated with e-learning.

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Here we will consider how to make the best use of synchronous, asynchronous, and blended learning modalities to deliver training that shifts the paradigm of online learning from individual consumption to social participation in order to deliver the impact businesses need, while meeting the needs of learners. First, let's get some definitions out of the way, then discuss how they can be best used.

Synchronous Learning happens in real-time, at fixed times, whether in-person or online.

Asynchronous Learning can be done at any time, at the learner's convenience, from any location.

Blended Learning (also known as polysynchronous) uses a combination of asynchronous and synchronous online learning. Traditionally considered as a combination of classroom and online learning, in today's environment, blended learning includes a mix of synchronous and asynchronous online learning.

Learning design that optimizes for engagement, and seeks to avoid the pitfalls of conference calls, is critical for moving forward in workplace learning. It can make the difference between putting meaningful learning on hold, given today's challenges, or coming out of the pandemic era stronger and better than ever. Having a sense of when to use synchronous modalities like video-conferencing, and when to incorporate asynchronous and blended techniques, is key to designing learning experiences that work best for their intended audiences.

The Spacing Effect

Pacing and spacing: distributing learning over time

As you begin to design new learning experiences or move in-person training online, a key strategy is to distribute learning over time to optimize learning results, using what is known as the 'spacing effect.' Keeping this concept in mind will help you decide when and where to use synchronous, asynchronous, and blended online modalities to maximize the impact of your training.

The spacing effect describes the scientifically grounded finding that long-term learning is promoted when learning is spaced over time, rather than massed into a single event. The phenomenon was originally identified by German psychologist Hermann Ebbinghaus in the 1880s as part of his investigations into the question of why, when we learn new information, the memories immediately begin to fade over time. He called this decay in memory the 'forgetting curve' and mapped it using graphs.

Ebbinghaus at the same time identified a spacing effect that delayed the decay in memory. By revisiting the information at spaced intervals, a higher portion of the information was preserved over time.

While Ebbinghaus's research is often associated with spaced repetition techniques for memorization such as flashcards and microlearning, subsequent research has established that the effect also applies to other forms of learning, including problem-solving and generalization to new situations. Studies indicate that spaced learning can be as much as twice as efficient as massed or crammed learning.

Engaging with information multiple times prompts the learner to develop stronger cognitive ties to the material. Each additional interaction increases the likelihood that the learner will internalize and more deeply learn the content at hand.

Re-engaging with learning at intervals results in longer-term retention
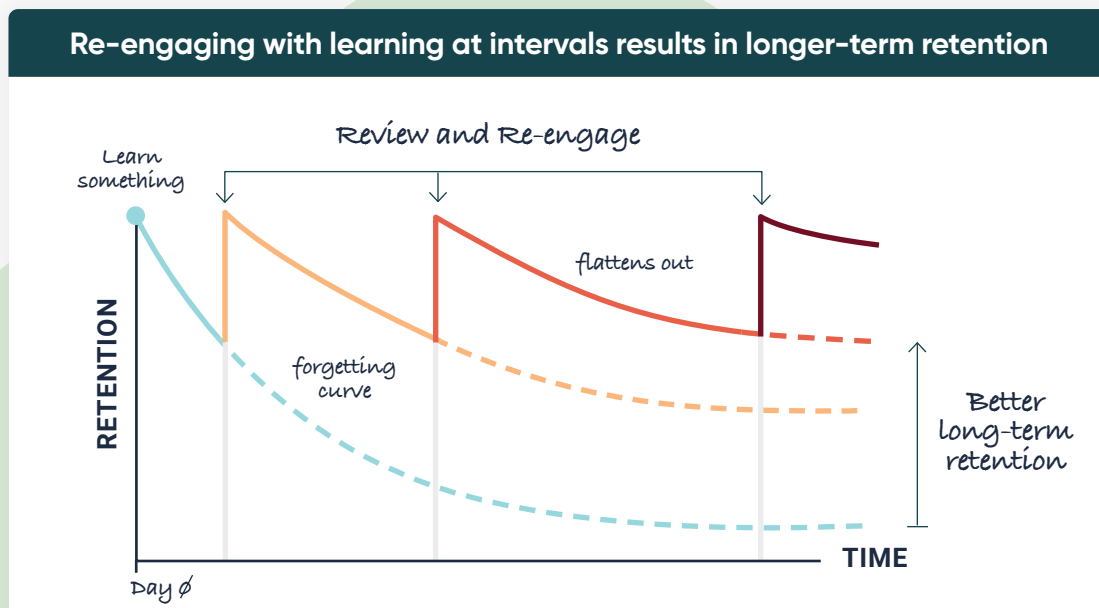
Synchronous Learning

Synchronous brings people together, but can struggle to engage

Synchronous Learning happens in real-time, at fixed times, whether in-person or online.

Synchronous online learning was initially assumed to be the next best thing to in-person interaction in the pandemic era. It is true that—when designed and delivered well—synchronous learning can create social presence and enable conversational flow. However, as we've seen, overuse has led to a second "pandemic" of sorts, in the form of widespread disengagement on conference calls that seem to never end. Good design takes into account the needs and circumstances of learners, so you'll need to understand that you can't just move in-person experiences from a classroom to a digital room.

Using synchronous online learning effectively means knowing what works for your learners and your topic, and what doesn't. Despite the issue of learning engagement, video-conferencing still has an important function. It can be an effective solution for informational sessions that are short enough to maintain engagement, and for experiences that can be broken into sessions and delivered over a period of time. As it stands, video conferences are the closest thing we have to face-to-face interactions with our colleagues.

GREAT FOR:

- ✓ **Broadcast, informational webinars: new policies, processes, updates**
- ✓ **Town Hall/Q&A sessions**
- ✓ **Experiences that can be broken down into short (~1hr) sessions**
- ✓ **Small-group learning communities**

Asynchronous Learning

Asynchronous lets learners proceed at their own pace—and also collaborate

Asynchronous Learning can be done at any time, at the learner's convenience, from any location.

Does asynchronous learning mean sacrificing collaboration? While self-paced learning used to be associated with isolated, individualized experiences, technology and best practices have evolved significantly so that designers can add structure, pacing, and collaboration to asynchronous learning.

Modern learning experience design can engage and support learners in ways that promote collaboration asynchronously.

- **Spaced learning** over time can enable reflection, practice, application, and feedback at both the individual and group levels.

- **Collaborative learning** experiences can be achieved through thoughtful discussions, team projects, peer interaction, and supportive facilitation.

- **Accountability** can be promoted by using deadlines or having learners work in groups and cohorts.

When all these activities are integrated into a single learning platform, supported by notifications, dashboards, and accessibility from any device, you can increase engagement in learning to drive behavior change in ways that watching a webinar alone can never achieve.

Asynchronous collaboration can empower learners in a way synchronous experiences can't. Time and space to process information is something most people need, in order to fulfill their potential. The opportunity for meaningful reflection can be lost in intensive, synchronous learning experiences. It can make it difficult for learners to put the information they're being bombarded with into the context of their own work. Collaborative, asynchronous learning experiences allow each learner to take matters into their own hands, and simultaneously benefit from their peers doing the same.

Like synchronous learning, asynchronous experiences work best when they are well designed. Structures that provide guidance and motivation, such as deadlines, feedback, and group projects can be incorporated into experience design from the start. These structures can provide learners with a sense of support and inclusion, rather than feeling isolated. Keeping this in mind is the key to making asynchronous learning fulfilling, rather than a chore that gets pushed to the back burner.

By shifting some learning activities from synchronous to asynchronous, designers can activate more learning styles and preferences as learners have more time to process information and think about how they will apply learning to their jobs. The flexibility offered by asynchronous learning has the potential to empower and engage learners. This is a way in which online learning can benefit learners who might be more introverted, and to maximize engagement for everyone.

GREAT FOR:

- ✓ Content that can (and maybe should) be digested at the learner's own pace

- ✓ Activities that require reflection and thoughtful discussion

- ✓ Practice and application to personally relevant circumstances

- ✓ Promoting inclusion by encouraging participation by introverts and others who might be inhibited in synchronous experiences

Blended/
Polysynchronous
Learning

Blended Learning uses a combination of asynchronous and synchronous online learning.

Blended models can drive engagement and collaboration across the learning experience

Since synchronous and asynchronous learning each bring their own benefits, can they be used together? Absolutely! This is called a blended, or polysynchronous approach. Traditionally thought about in terms of in-person training with online supplementary learning, in the era of remote work and learning, the blend is between video-conferencing and asynchronous learning.

When skillfully combined in a cohesive way, asynchronous and synchronous learning can complement, and even amplify each other, especially for experiences that happen over time.

For example, starting a course with a synchronous call can set the stage for success. Engagement in the overall experience can be heightened when learners get to know each other and the facilitator, and when learning expectations and goals are clear for everyone. The kickoff call can be followed by asynchronous learning, punctuated by periodic, synchronous check-ins, live Q&A sessions, or final presentations. With this, collaboration and engagement occur across the entire experience and avoid digital burnout.
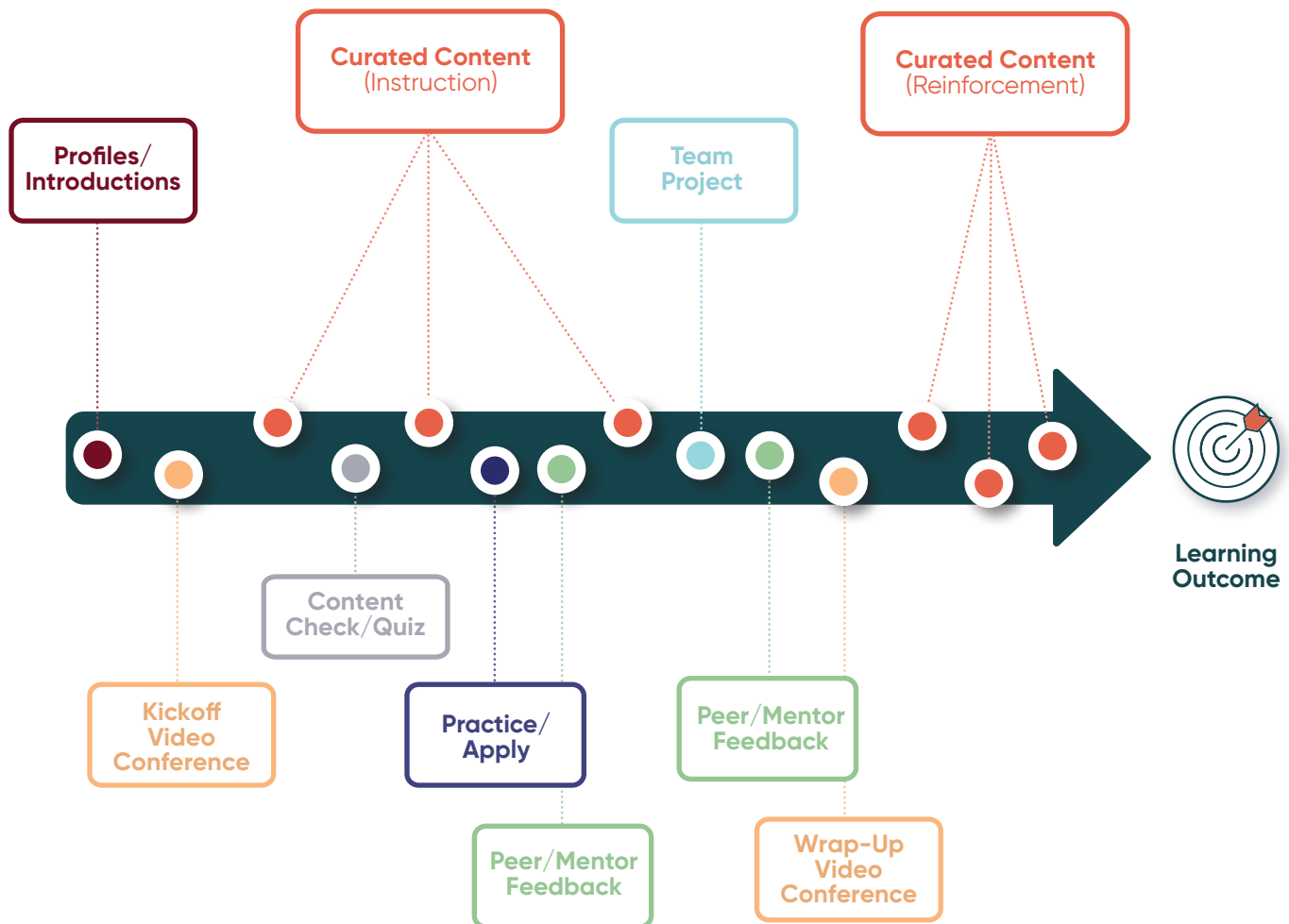
GREAT FOR:

- ✓ **Extended learning experiences**
- ✓ **Consolidating knowledge through a variety of learning methods**
- ✓ **Establishing and distributing accountability**
- ✓ **Creating connections between learners who get to know each other**

The key to success is a purposeful design process that considers learners' needs as well as defined learning objectives. In addition to considering what you want learners to know and do, and how you want to measure it, the right combination of synchronous and asynchronous learning can set your learners up for success, and deliver the impact you want.

Example learning journey spaces synchronous and asynchronous activities over time

Profiles/ Introductions

Curated Content (Instruction)

Team Project

Curated Content (Reinforcement)

Content Check/Quiz

Kickoff Video Conference

Practice/ Apply

Peer/Mentor Feedback

Peer/Mentor Feedback

Wrap-Up Video Conference

Learning Outcome

Parting Thoughts

Design for engagement and impact

Like learners, learning designers can also be empowered by the opportunity for reflection and growth that well-designed online learning experiences offer. Present-day challenges aside, few would argue that traditional, in-person, pedagogical practices are ideal for everyone. A "one size fits all" approach always leaves many by the wayside.

While the current landscape has its unique challenges, today's learning designers are in a position to address some long-standing problems. The sudden shift to online learning was disruptive, but has opened up opportunities to make learning more engaging and impactful. Thoughtful design that employs synchronous, asynchronous, and blended modalities effectively can be just as rewarding and enriching for learners as in-person experiences, if not more so.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

As you begin to design your next learning experience, think about how you can leverage technology to mix and match synchronous and asynchronous learning activities that not only meet, but exceed, the outcomes you'd get in an in-person experience. Without the pressure of cramming everything into a single learning session, you can expand your design horizons to realize the benefits of distributing learning over time:

- ✓ More time to learn means more time to apply concepts.
- ✓ Deeper learning happens when learners are doing, not consuming.
- ✓ Learners develop connections and relationships when they work together over time.

About NovoEd

Founded at Stanford's Social Algorithms Lab in 2012, NovoEd is a capability-building platform that uses social and collaborative learning to drive alignment, performance, and mobility at scale. Through cohort-based experiences, NovoEd taps into collective wisdom, placing each learner at the center of perspective, application, and expertise. Large enterprises such as 3M, GE, and Nestlé partner with NovoEd to accelerate their critical initiatives and reconnect teams through learning that is felt, experienced and swiftly transformed into impact. Visit **www.novoed.com** to learn more.

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