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Online or hybrid training? The 5 differences

What is hybrid learning and what are its characteristics? Here is what makes it different from e-learning and blended learning.

New technologies have completely changed the way we teach and approach education. During the lockdown that followed the Covid-19 pandemic, **learning** was entirely web-based platforms and e-learning had become the only possible way to access training, both school and work. With the return to the classroom, e-learning and digital media have not been abandoned, but have enriched training modes, creating training possibilities that make use of both traditional and digital media. These are some of the forms of hybrid and blended learning, involving the use of both training modes, organised according to different methodologies.

What is hybrid learning?

Hybrid learning refers to a training approach that combines face-to-face and online courses, creating a fusion of physical and virtual learning. The student, therefore, can choose at his or her own discretion whether to follow the lesson in the classroom, in person, or from home by connecting remotely with any digital device.

In hybrid teaching, therefore, the physical space and **traditional face-to-face tools** are combined with the **virtual dimension** and digital and multimedia supports. Lessons take place simultaneously both in the classroom and online, allowing the student to enjoy a variety of materials, giving him or her the choice between the traditional method or e-learning. The student, therefore, can select the learning style that best suits his or her needs and decide how to attend classes, whether face-to-face or online.

Hybrid learning, due to these characteristics, offers students a number of **advantages**:

- It guarantees an education even for those who do not have the opportunity to physically attend classes;
- It is more accessible for people with disabilities, because it eliminates physical barriers;
- It eliminates distances, making it possible for people physically located on the other side of the world to come together;
- It allows users to connect from home;
- Reaches even the most remote areas;
- Allows participation in presence, physically following the lessons, for those who prefer the traditional learning mode.

The tools of hybrid learning

In hybrid learning, there are several tools that can be used for training. Among others, one can mention:

- **Videoconferencing**, which allows the same lesson to be delivered simultaneously both in presence and online, to enable synchronous learning;
- The **management system**, i.e. an LMS platform, which allows access to digital content and to keep track of students' learning progress;
- The **forums or chats**, which allow remotely connected students to interact with teachers or students present in class and to collaborate in the case of group work.

Precisely because of the different tools it puts at the student's disposal, hybrid learning can combine varieties of learning, resulting in different models, including:

- **Differentiated learning** for students in the classroom and those connected online remotely: the teacher, therefore, provides different activities depending on the learning mode chosen by the students, to enable them to follow the lesson adequately. Using this model, the students carry out the same programme and interact with each other, but perform different activities.

- **Multi-track model**: also in this case, students opting for traditional teaching follow the same lesson as those opting for e-learning, but without having to interact with each other.
- **Project model**, which is used when lessons also require the use of experiential learning. Students in face-to-face classes can easily resort to hands-on experiences to put into practice what they have learnt in theoretical lectures. It is clear that remotely connected students will not be able to carry out the same experiences. It is possible, however, to devise a project that remote learners can work on with the help of virtual simulations, which allow them to immerse themselves in reality and have a virtual practical experience.

Hybrid learning combines different types of learning: formal, informal and experience-based learning, enabling the student to achieve a complete education, while also putting into practice the knowledge acquired during the theoretical course. Hybrid learning offers various modes of training for both face-to-face students and those connected from home via a digital medium, combining traditional teaching with e-learning.

Hybrid learning does not mean mixed

Hybrid learning, therefore, combines reality with the virtual world. This mode of training is often used as a synonym for **blended learning**, but there are differences that make these strategies two different approaches to training. Blended learning consists of both traditional and e-learning methods.

But unlike hybrid learning, where lessons are conducted simultaneously online and in-presence, with the same syllabus for all learners irrespective of the type of delivery chosen, blended learning involves the presence of online and offline elements at different times: lectures are usually conducted in the classroom and are then complemented by online courses. Thus, while in hybrid learning, students can decide whether to do lectures in the classroom or online, in blended learning, the online training part is complementary to the classroom activities.

Blended learning is a teaching method that takes place in a mixed mode: a part of the course is taught in the classroom, using traditional didactics, while a part takes place online, using new technologies. An example of blended learning is the flipped classroom: in this case, students use online platforms to acquire the notions they need and then engage with the teacher in the classroom. Another mode of blended learning is the rotational model, which involves accessing teaching remotely and classroom training in turn.

Online or hybrid training? The 5 differences

Online learning is easily distinguishable from traditional training, which takes place in the classroom. But, when it comes to hybrid learning (and also blended learning) the distinction becomes more subtle. Therefore, one must be careful to recognise five differences between online and hybrid learning:

1. **Traditional elements**. In e-learning, the characteristics of face-to-face training are eliminated, in favour of learning that passes exclusively through the web, using virtual tools and eliminating the in-presence relationship between the users and the trainer and between the learners themselves. Hybrid learning, on the other hand, allows a choice between both learning modes, depending on the needs of individual learners.
2. The role of the **trainer**. In online learning, the figure of the teacher is often secondary, if not non-existent, because users only use software and interface with a machine, be it a computer or a smartphone. In hybrid learning, on the other hand, the figure of the trainer is active, because the teacher is present everywhere and can be reached either in person, for a face-to-face meeting, or remotely with a video call.
3. **Dynamism**. The content of e-learning courses is usually uniform, whereas in hybrid learning the individual lessons are different. In fact, online courses are initially designed and, unless modified, remain the same for the various classes and the students participating in the course will have the same experience. In the case of hybrid learning, on the other hand, the lessons change from time to time, because they are taught by an individual, who may decide to modify the modules of his or her courses in whole or in part.
4. **Autonomy and relationship**. Online training leaves users with total autonomy, allowing them to decide when and where to access learning. The ability to connect remotely, in fact, allows learners to follow lectures or carry out exercises anywhere and at any time, without having to travel to a physical location. Hybrid learning, on the other hand, takes place synchronously online and offline, leaving less choice for students, but giving them the opportunity to participate in live events. In both e-learning and hybrid learning, the relationship aspect is crucial, as it allows the user

to engage with other students and the lecturer, enriching their knowledge. Digital media also take care of the relational aspect, thanks to chats and forums that, in addition to creating a connection between the user and the teacher, allow a network to be woven between the various students, who can thus exchange opinions and doubts about the courses they are following. In hybrid learning, it is usually students of the same course who relate to each other, who follow the lessons at the same time, some remotely and some in-presence, whereas in online learning, people enrolled in different lessons can meet virtually.

5. **The digital sphere**. In e-learning, online learning is the only one possible and training remains relegated to the virtual sphere: texts, images, videos and audio files are uploaded onto a platform that allows the user to access all the knowledge he or she needs. Hybrid learning also makes use of virtual media, but training can also take place offline. Although these modes of learning have many common features, they should not be confused with each other because they represent different nuances of education born with the arrival of new technologies, which are increasingly entering the daily lives of citizens around the world. Hybrid learning represents the union of online and offline life, meeting the needs of students and workers, who can choose the learning mode that best suits their needs.

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