



hemsley
fraser

Reimagining in-person learning

The power of human connection

Introduction

In a world where communication is constant, but connection is fading, the power of in person human connection has never been more vital.

Our hybrid world of virtual meetings is now the norm, leaving little room for handshakes, hallway chats, or shared energy. Emails, messages, and social feeds have replaced conversations; the “water-cooler chat” now often happens with our pets or partners. Algorithms increasingly shape our preferences and apps are running our routines from fitness to finances. For others there has been a shift back to more office-based work, but again much of that time is still spent in virtual meetings, not gaining the benefits from being together in person.

When we consider the world of learning, there has been a huge swing from in person to digital and virtual learning since the pandemic, and this has largely remained in place despite the new normal of hybrid working.



Contents

- ✓ Connected but isolated
- ✓ The benefits and balance of in-person connection
- ✓ The rise and role of in-person training
- ✓ What should an in-person learning experience deliver and look like today?
- ✓ Design Principles: The FACES Framework

In this paper, we propose that the time is right to **'reimagine'** how we use in-person learning as part of a blended learning experience. Intentionally combining modalities at different stages, using each for what it does best, with in person experiences elevating the moments that most need shared energy, collaboration and connection.

Rebalancing how and where we use in-person as part of blended experiences is not a step backwards, but a strategic response to build the critical capabilities needed in today's organisations.



Abby Paterson
Learning Solution
Architect



Sarah Steele
Principal Learning
Designer

Connected but isolated

As our world has continued to become increasingly digital, online and automated our 'human connectedness' in society, work and leisure is diminishing. Will our innate need for human interaction spur us to intentionally design when and how we reconnect more in person?

“Physical interaction may be the key to restoring social connection”

Psychology today, (25)

“Addressing loneliness requires a balance of digital and physical solutions”

Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking (25).

Neuroscience shows that our need for human connection is deeply wired: positive social interactions activate the brain's reward systems, at the same time social exclusion trigger neural responses that mirror the experience of physical pain.

(Eisenberger et al., 2003; Novembre et al., 2015; Eisenberger, 2015)

Constant connectivity now feels non-negotiable; Recent research shows that anxiety about being offline is now commonplace, and **nomophobia** the fear of being without one's phone or connection causes significant stress.

Oxford University Press 24.

One in three U.S. adults reports being online “almost constantly.” Yet as screen time rises, so do loneliness and isolation, undermining mental health, collective wellbeing and causing significant business challenges, including worse work performance. With loneliness related absenteeism costing U.S. employers \$154 billion annually.

Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking (25).

The benefits & balance of in-person connection



Beyond wellbeing, in-person interactions deepen relationships, accelerate collaboration, and lift performance, outcomes that are harder to replicate on screen. *Forbes (2025)*.



“Organisations with stronger connectedness are 5.4× more likely to be agile, 3.2× more likely to have satisfied customers, and 2.3× more likely to have engaged employees”. *HBR (2023)*

As we navigate work in an AI era, we must sharpen the human capabilities with the highest value; our emotional intelligence, empathy, judgement, creativity, culture-building and collaboration. Being together in person allows far better reading of body language, understanding of the complexities of team dynamics, the subtle cues that fuel collaboration and create workplace cultures.

In 2025, the World Health Organization released a roadmap calling for global action to shift social norms and expand opportunities for meaningful connection.

“As technology reshapes our lives, we must ensure it strengthens, not weakens, human connection.” WHO (25)

“The key to success isn’t choosing between people or technology - it’s finding the right balance” *Forbes (25)*

We don't have to choose between being connected to our tech or being connected to humans. We can have both. Blended learning architectures work best when technology and in person connection are integrated, using digital and virtual components to raise awareness, launch events and build foundational knowledge, and in person moments to accelerate skill acquisition through immersion, practice and deeper interpersonal connections.

“To build genuine human connection, you need to be more systemic in your approach” HBR (25)

By using technology wisely we can create space for us to intentionally reinvest that time in high-value personal, connected, experiences that have impact. The evidence is clear: digital transformation, and now AI, bring real benefits. Hybrid work can improve balance; AI can enhance productivity. However, without a clear strategy for connection, we risk losing the trust, collaboration, and innovation that make teams thrive.

Now is the time to reimagine and rebalance how and where ‘in-person’ learning is used within your blend to enhance the connection between colleagues and teams, build trust and shared experience, through thoughtfully designed blended learning experiences that maximise the opportunity that being together brings.

“In-person events can build trust, foster innovation and create a sense of belonging that transcends the limitations of screen time.”

Forbes (25)

The rise and role of in-person training

Virtual training remains a core component of the learning landscape offering cost effective, convenient solutions and globally consistent delivery. At the same time, blended and in-person training has been steadily returning. Our annual learning survey shows usage rising from 66% (2022) to 87% (2025). (Hemsley Fraser L&D Impact Survey, 2025)

The Hemsley learning surveys reflect a shift ongoing toward more balanced learning journeys, where organisations are curating an intentional mix of virtual, digital, social, and in-person experiences. The question is no longer 'virtual or in-person?' but 'what combination of components within the blended learning experience delivers the learning outcomes most effectively?'

As learning portfolios gradually shift to encompass more in-person components, how do you know if you have the right balance? And when should you review and re-balance to achieve the learning outcomes you need?

87%

2025

66%

2022

Learning that is most effective in person:

- ✓ **Practical and hands on skills** (Springer Nature 2024)
- ✓ **Learning that requires real time feedback and adaptive facilitation** (American college of education 2025) - such as coaching, management skills, communication
- ✓ **Collaborative skills** (California Learning Resources Network 2025) - such as teamwork, facilitation, creativity
- ✓ **Social-Emotional Skills** - (California Learning Resources Network 2025) - such as problem solving, relationship building, negotiation

Learning that can still be very effective virtually:

- ✓ Outcomes focused on knowledge acquisition and comprehension
- ✓ Where learners need the motivation from learning together to engage more fully
- ✓ For topics that have a lower cognitive load, and less behavioural change required
- ✓ Where building a sense of an online learning community is a useful outcome

Seen together, these two lists illustrate why the blended approach is essential, and how components can complement each other. Virtual and digital learning experiences continue to deliver time efficient and scalable benefits; whilst in-person learning offers a powerful antidote to some of our hybrid work challenges.

Use it for sparking engagement, innovation and problem solving, building human capability, and team connectedness while mitigating issues around isolation, loneliness, digital fatigue, and burnout.

What should an in-person learning experience deliver and look like today?

A great in person learning experience today isn't defined by simply being in the same room, it's defined by how intentionally that time is used to create connection, clarity, and applied capability. Design needs to span the whole journey and plan the supporting blended elements.

Before

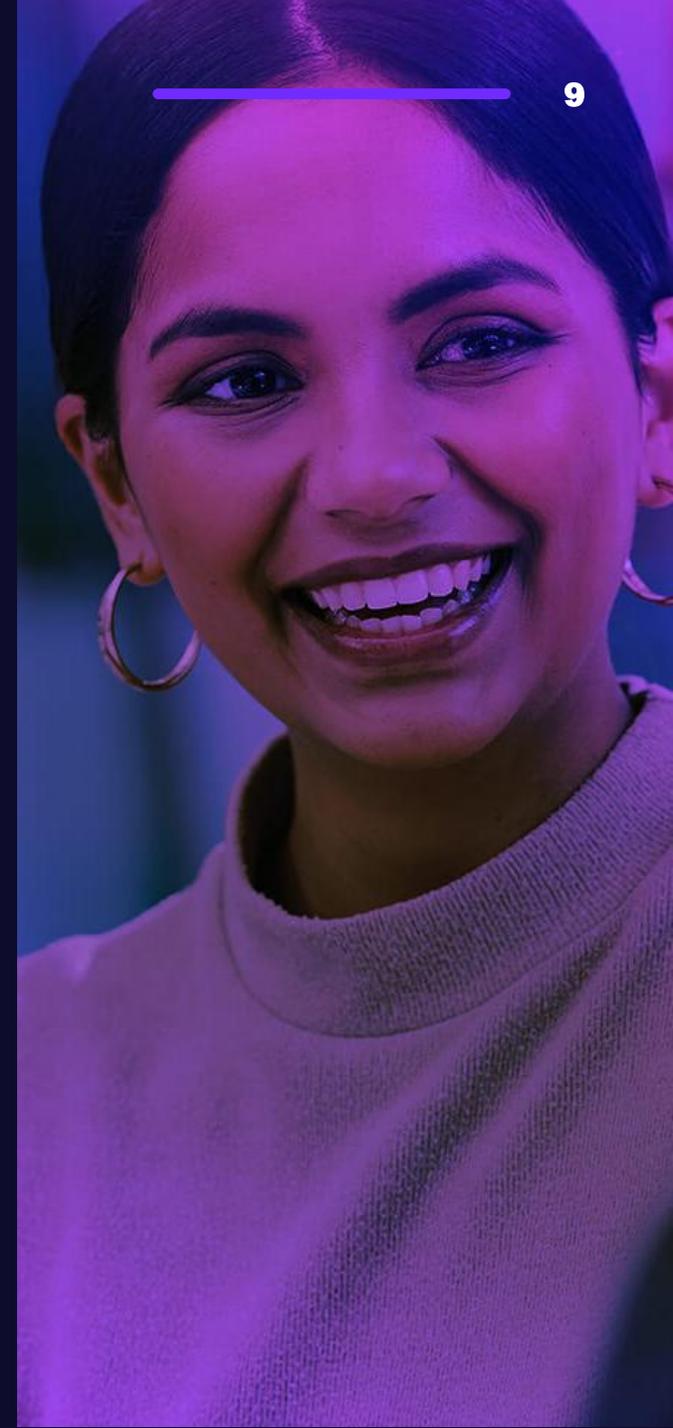
Prime learners with short, digital or virtual touchpoints to build relevance and spark excitement and curiosity. Give people the foundations of theory and instill the training need, or problem to solve, ahead of coming together, this avoids 'chalk and talk' or poor use of time together.

During

Learning should feel lived, not delivered. Content needs to support the experience, not dominate it. Activities should engage and make space for deeper connection and real conversations, replicate real world experiences and allow for feedback and adaption.

After

Blend digital tools, nudges, and social learning opportunities to support accountability and embed application Provide simple tools or prompts that help learners apply ideas back in their flow of work, allowing insight to be turned into meaningful actions





Ultimately, in person learning should give people what digital spaces struggle to offer: room to think, talk, experiment, and connect. It should leave them inspired, energised, clearer on what to do next, and better equipped for the realities of their day-to-day work.

It's more than what happens “in the room” and together. Good experience goes beyond 2D and 3D, instead all dimensions are factored, to ensure the human experience unfolds to deliver meaningful and deliberate learning outcomes which improve performance long after the day ends.

“in-person teams generated 15% to 20% more ideas than virtual teams”
Stanford Business School (2024)

Are you considering a return to more in-person learning events?

When deciding if in-person is the best format consider these three factors;



Learning outcomes

- Does the subject and outcome require real world practice and discussion?
- Will the experience enhance collaboration, connection and collective problem solving?
- Could learners achieve the same outcome independently or virtually?



The learners

- Do the learners need the opportunity, time and space to intentionally step away, and switch off, from daily demands and engage in an in-person event?
- Is the perceived benefits and value strong enough to drive full participation, so learners prioritise this in their schedules?
- Is support available from their managers, stakeholders and wider environment to attend in person and to support putting the learning into action?

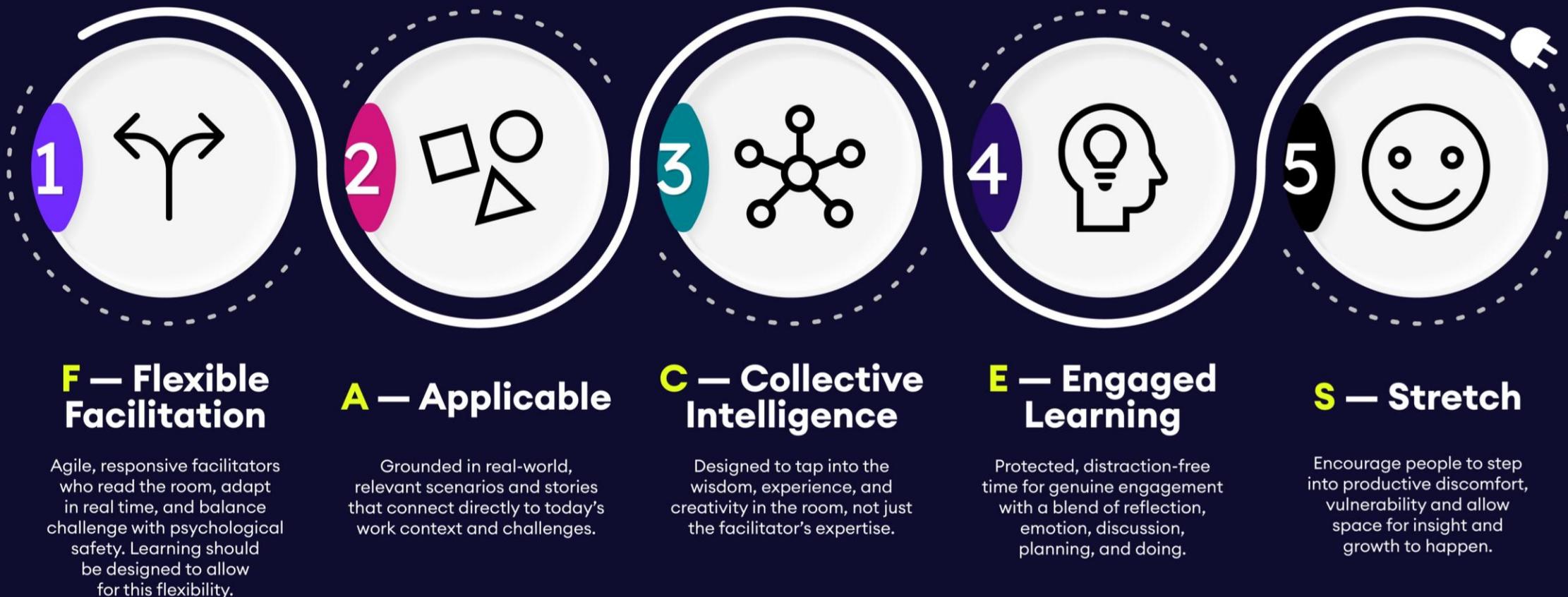


The logistics

- Is there commitment to the whole learning journey – before, during, and after – not just ‘time in the room’?
- How will the in-person experience connect with digital, virtual, and social components of the learning journey to reinforce and sustain behaviour change?
- What other elements can enhance the event making it an engaging memorable experience, beyond traditional learning delivery?
- Will the challenges of bringing the right learners together in person, take so long to achieve or be so costly, that it would outweigh the benefits of in-person learning?

Design Principles: The **FACES** Framework

To deliver in-person experiences that feel modern, meaningful, and integrate blended components, programmes can be shaped around **the FACES framework**:



Done well and with intention, these principles create a meaningful human experience that strengthens culture, builds trust, and enhances performance.



Getting started - reimagining in-person learning

With a backdrop of constant change, tech transformation and digital overload, human connection is not the soft stuff, it's the stuff that keeps us standing and moving forward with collective energy and purpose, and right now, it may be one of the most important investments any organisation can make.

In-person learning can be a critical component in building connection in your organisation, and connection is essential to achieve learning outcomes for some of the most critical capabilities for the future.

The three steps to consider

Rebalance your current learning offer and review learning outcomes, and consider where in person can add value, when other modalities maybe limited.

Re-imagine and engage learners and stakeholders on what in-person learning can uniquely deliver and how it can bring the connection needed for wider business performance.

Re-design your programmes, where appropriate, to include engaging in-person experiences that maximise connection, shared energy and collaboration as part of the overall blend.

This is an opportunity to use well designed in-person learning experiences to give people what they're missing most:



Meaningful connection



Shared energy



Space to think and plan beyond the noise

These experiences don't just feel good, they directly strengthen trust, collaboration, and performance whilst building the culture, capability, and cohesion that humans need to thrive.



www.hemsleyfraser.com/in-person

enquiries@hemsleyfraser.com

Reimagining in-person learning

The power of human connection