



Lessons From Blended Professional Learning

The Case of Family Engagement

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Imagine you walk into a professional learning seminar on the topic of family engagement to support academic success. Before the session begins, the facilitator asks you to take out your smartphone and text your response to a poll question about your comfort level communicating with families. As the seminar gets under way, the facilitator shows video clips of parents and teachers sharing data during a parent-teacher conference. You notice that a few of your colleagues are tweeting ideas using the hashtag #famengage. You go home that night and join the instructor's Wiki site, where you are invited to continue the conversation. From there, you connect with your new colleagues virtually, participate in different web chats and web conferences, and interact with materials and ideas you want anywhere, anytime that is convenient for you.

This is just one example of blended learning, which is often thought of as employing more than one learning approach (e.g., lecture, discussion, case study, project-based) inside and outside the classroom using a variety of digital media resources (such as computers, discussion boards, videos, and social media).¹ When this approach is applied to professional learning—what can be referred to as blended professional learning—educators are given the powerful opportunity to create their own individual professional learning experiences. This flexible modality can lead to improved teaching practice, especially when coupled with opportunities for learners to interact with materials, connect with other educators, and apply issues to their own practice.²

Blended learning—the combining of different instructional approaches and digital media tools both inside and outside of the classroom—can promote professional learning in family engagement.

To support blended professional learning in family engagement, in 2013 Harvard Family Research Project created [HFRP Interact](#); the purpose of which is to host conversations around family engagement topics and disseminate online interactive tools and resources so that professional learning in family engagement opportunities can be available to all professionals, either individually or in group settings, on demand. Through a range of interactive events, educators learn about promising practices to promote family engagement in the home, school, and community.

What We've Learned

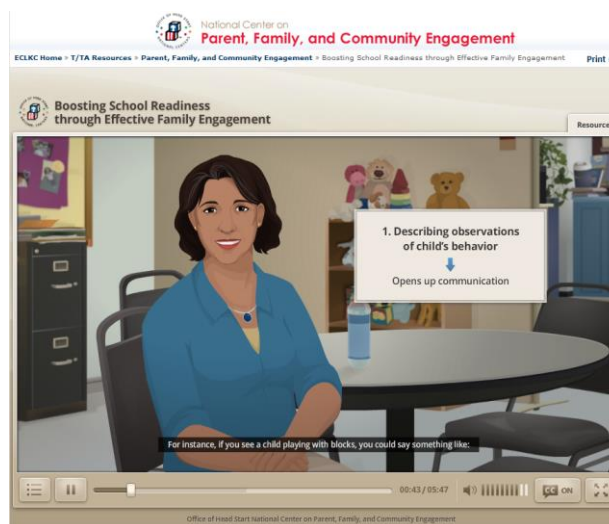
In this commentary, we draw on our experience with HFRP Interact to highlight what effective blended professional learning in family engagement might look like. Our goal is to assist other blended professional learning designers as they build on the lessons we've learned and to help those in the field know what to look for when choosing quality blended professional learning opportunities. Below are our recommendations for effective approaches.

Effective Blended Professional Learning Opportunities in Family Engagement

Lessons Learned	Blended Learning Method
1. Offer opportunities for educators to practice effective communication skills and get real-time feedback.	Simulation
2. Create networks among educators to learn from one another and share information.	Virtual Learning Communities
3. Deliver content through multiple modalities so that educators can connect with ideas in a variety of ways.	Web Conferences
4. Provide moderated, structured, and organized discussions so that educators come away with concrete practices, action plans, and goals.	Text-based Chats
5. Put educators' experience at the forefront of learning by asking them to reflect on their own assumptions and on other people's perspectives, and to develop their own ideas and solutions to real-world dilemmas.	Create Your Own Case and Interactive Cases

Offer opportunities for educators to practice effective communication skills and get real-time feedback.

Simulations are not just for jet pilots anymore: The Office of Head Start National Center on Family, Parent, and Community Engagement, in which HFRP participates as a co-investigator, has developed two family engagement-focused [simulations](#). The simulations transport learners to a virtual conversation with a family, in which learners have an opportunity to make decisions about how to respond to real-life dialogue. The simulations let anyone who works with families learn about and practice relationship-building strategies in a virtual environment, get real-time feedback about their responses, and gauge their effectiveness. Data we have collected on the simulation show that it is one of the most popular resources from the National Center and that those who use it are highly engaged in the experience. It is currently being used by Head Start and non-Head Start professionals alike for staff orientation and skill development.



Create networks among educators to learn from one another and share information.

Learning communities emerge when groups of people who share a similar concern engage in a process of collective information sharing. HFRP has been involved recently in organizing two different virtual learning communities: one learning community consists of a group of eight Head Start programs around the nation at the forefront of parent, family, and community engagement work and the other learning community is made up of faculty members, based nationally and internationally, who use family engagement cases in their parent, family, and community engagement classes for both undergraduate and graduate students.

From these two experiences, we have learned that virtual learning communities are an extremely powerful way for participants to share information, learn new ideas, meet new contacts, and feel connected to a larger initiative. We've also learned that these virtual events are most beneficial when participants are given opportunities to focus on a similar concrete idea that is shared ahead of time, and ideally, when the idea has been tested out prior to the session. For example, in our virtual learning community with faculty members, we asked each faculty member to pilot a teaching case in class. During the learning community event, each faculty member shared for two to three minutes what he did and how it worked. After the sharing period was over, faculty members then commented and reflected on each other's work.



Deliver content through multiple modalities so that educators can connect with ideas in a variety of ways.

Our experience offering [web conferences](#) has taught us that these events are most successful when they allow participants to engage with material in multiple interactive ways. For example, in nearly all of our web conferences we provide visual slides related to the content of the conference, invite multiple voices to narrate the visuals, offer opportunities for panelists to respond to participants' questions, and include pauses for polling so that we can gauge participant interest and ideas on particular topics. At the end of each web conference, we also include

what we refer to as an "open chat," during which professionals can have uninterrupted opportunities to discuss content and connect with one another. Data show that participants highly value web conferences

TODAY'S CONFERENCE WILL EXAMINE:



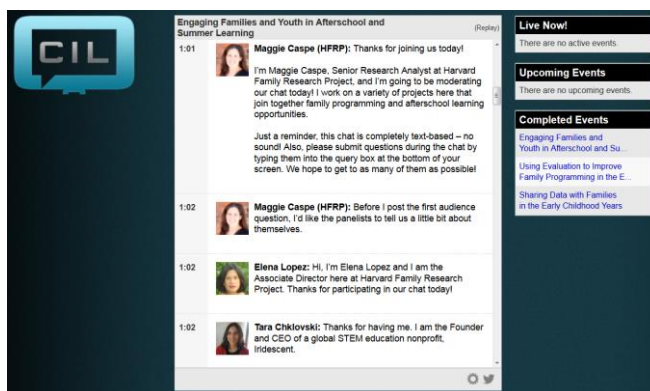
1. Connections between family engagement policy and practice
2. Examples of system building from the public- and private-sector perspectives
3. Strategies to promote equitable family engagement

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as a professional learning tool, and organizations have even adopted practices through which teams of educators participate in a web conference together, creating an even more active experience.

Provide moderated, structured, and organized discussions so that educators come away with concrete practices, action plans, and goals.

If you've ever participated in a twitter chat, you know that the pace of the tweets can be fast and furious, making it difficult to effectively connect with the material coming across your screen. To help slow down the pace, HFRP has offered a variety of moderated text-based chats on the platform [CoveritLive](#), which allows audience members to type in questions to panelists in real time. Panelists can then respond to questions in the order they like, in the structure and pace that they prefer.



Put educators' experience at the forefront of learning by asking them to reflect on their own assumptions and on other people's perspectives, and to develop their own ideas and solutions to real-world dilemmas.

Business, medicine and public health, and education have long used cases as teaching tools. In the case method, students and practitioners read, interpret, and analyze realistic scenarios and grapple with the dilemmas that each situation raises. For practitioners and educators who work with families, the case method challenges readers to consider multiple perspectives, think critically about real-world issues, and apply skills and knowledge about families in different situations. For nearly two decades, HFRP has published [cases on family engagement](#) and recently has given them a new twist. In the [Create Your Own Case Toolkit](#), in partnership with the Cambridge Engagement Team, we have developed a series of steps and exercises to allow those who work with families to re-create their own experiences as case examples. We've found that when educators have opportunities to create their own cases, they build their knowledge and skills in working with families, have time to reflect on their own work, spend more

Create Your Own Case Toolkit

Building Your Family Engagement Skills and Knowledge



Telling stories and turning them into cases is a great professional development activity. Learn six steps you can use to reflect on your work with families and develop ideas about how to support their needs.

GETTING STARTED

A powerful way to help others learn from your experiences with families is by turning your stories into cases. [Get started](#) with the Create Your Own Case Toolkit by reading tips from others who have gone through the process.

1 REFLECT

Reflect on your experiences working with families. Read more about [Step 1](#) and complete [Exercise 1.1: Reflecting on Families You Have Worked With](#) and [Exercise 1.2: Using the Empathy Map](#) which are designed to help you think about families with whom you have worked.

2 IDENTIFY

Identify a mismatch. Read more about [Step 2](#) and complete [Exercise 2: Identifying Mismatches](#) which is designed to help you think about a mismatch for your case.

3 CHOOSE

Choose people and information to include in your case. Read more about [Step 3](#) and complete [Exercise 3: Choosing People and Information for Your Case](#) which is designed to help you elaborate on different people's perspectives.

4 DEVELOP

Develop your case structure. Read more about [Step 4](#) and complete [Exercise 4.1: Developing Your Case Structure](#) and [Exercise 4.2: Structuring Your Case Around the "Back Story" and the "Full Story"](#) which are designed to help you develop a case outline.

5 DRAFT AND REVISE

Draft and revise. Read more about [Step 5](#) and complete [Exercise 5: Reviewing Your Case](#) to help you edit your work either individually or with a group.

6 SHARE

Share your case with others. Read more about this [final step](#) and complete [Exercise 6: Creating Discussion Questions](#) which is designed to help you develop discussion questions about your case.

time thinking about family strengths, and develop a framework to guide their approach to working with families in the future.

A Look at New Approaches

As new technology, apps, and digital capabilities are developed each day, the look and feel of blended professional learning will continue to evolve. In this issue of the August *FINE Newsletter*, [Blended Learning: Preparing and Supporting Educators to Engage Families](#), which focuses on professional learning, we introduce an [interactive case in family engagement](#). Taking the best of what we've learned about simulations and the benefits of the case method, we have merged the two so that learners can engage and reflect on a difficult situation, independently or with a group, with or without the explicit input of a case facilitator or course instructor. The interactive case lets you click on the different people and perspectives presented and reflect on the information provided to you. The interactive case is also designed so that you can take a close-up view of the people in the situation and then take a step back and reflect on the larger organizational issues that influence each person's behavior.

In this issue we will also take a deeper look at the [Create Your Own Case Toolkit](#), explore an app that lets users organize and set goals during and after professional learning experiences, and share faculty reflections with undergraduate and graduate students through piloting a case related to the transition to kindergarten. Undoubtedly, blended professional learning approaches will continue to advance, and we are excited to improve our practice along the way.

If you aren't already a *FINE Newsletter* [subscriber](#), join now so you don't miss a thing!

Why Professional Learning in Family Engagement Matters

For nearly 20 years, Harvard Family Research Project has been chronicling what we know about family engagement in professional learning, and our findings have shown that:

1. It is important for teachers to continue to learn and practice family engagement skills on an ongoing basis throughout their careers, because strong family engagement matters for children's academic success, families' well-being, schools' performance, and teachers' own job satisfaction.³
2. Many educators are eager to engage families, but they often lack adequate time and training to learn and practice the skills that they need to do so effectively.⁴
3. Teachers who are ready to learn new techniques for engaging with families feel safe taking risks, and have social support as they explore new practices.⁵
4. Schools and other organizations that offer effective practices incorporate family engagement into professional learning systemically, not just occasionally, and offer training that is flexible and meets individual needs.⁶
5. Professional learning is best when it is interactive, giving learners opportunities to grapple with real-world examples, reflect on their own experiences, and share and gain knowledge from others.⁷

To explore these ideas further read [Professional Development in Family Engagement: A Few Often-Overlooked Strategies for Success.](#)

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- ¹ Harvard Family Research Project (2013). A click away: A Q&A with Chip Donohue about the benefits of online distance learning for in-service teachers. *Family Involvement Network of Educators (FINE) Newsletter*, 5(4). Retrieved from <http://www.hfrp.org/publications-resources/browse-our-publications/a-click-away-a-q-a-with-chip-donohue-about-the-benefits-of-online-distance-learning-for-in-service-teachers>; Pankin, J., Roberts, J., & Savio, M. (2012). *Blended learning at MIT*. Retrieved from http://web.mit.edu/training/trainers/resources/blended_learning_at_mit.pdf; Powell, A., Watson, J., Staley, P., Patrick, S., Horn, M., Fetzner, L., Hibbard, L., Oglesby, J., & Verma, S. (2015). *Blending learning: The evolution of online and face-to-face education from 2008-2015*. Retrieved from http://www.inacol.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/iNACOL_Blended-Learning-The-Evolution-of-Online-And-Face-to-Face-Education-from-2008-2015.pdf
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- ⁶ Alves, L. (2014). *Five professional development resources that promote family engagement*. *Family Involvement Network of Educators (FINE) Newsletter*, 6(5). Retrieved from <http://www.hfrp.org/publications-resources/browse-our-publications/five-professional-development-resources-that-promote-family-engagement>
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