Who are your users?

Improving the user experience

Communicator

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Overcome user pain points

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User pain points and overcoming them

How do you ensure that your e-learning is suitable for your users? Helen Hill, describes six pain points and gives suggestions for conquering them.

"The content you produce isn't for you."

Lately, this has become something of a mantra for myself and my business.

The more I work in the fields of e-learning and content design, the more I see customers and SMEs who are focusing on what they *think* should be in the content, rather than what the user needs. It is easily done, especially with tight deadlines and budgets. I am as guilty of it as anybody. So I tell myself this repeatedly.

We often make presumptions, thinking we know what the learner needs and the best way to deliver it, without actually asking or testing our assumptions with them. And after a course is published, we don't always treat feedback with the importance that maybe it should receive.

Everything you do as a designer should put the user or learner at the centre. The experience should be based around the **learner, their needs and their situation**.

In order to effectively do this, you need to ensure that you have a good understanding of not just who your user is, but their reasons for completing the learning, the environment in which the learning is likely to take place (and therefore any potential distractions), the way they speak and their level of confidence with both the material and the technology.

There are many pain points that may cause a learner to not engage with your course, which I have broadly classified into six themes.

1. Time

> It takes so long

Working lives are busy.

In recent years job roles have expanded and we are all having to take on more responsibilities, usually in the same designated amount of time. In addition, industries move quickly, so we continually have to adapt to the changes, whilst already having lots to learn just to keep up.

Professional development, whether voluntary or compulsory, compounds this. Few of us feel like we have

> I haven't got time for this

the time to sit and complete a course, certainly not in one big chunk of time. So what can we do to help?

> How long is this going to take me?

- Break the course down into *microlearning*; allowing your learners to complete the tasks in short snippets. Lots of smaller units feel much more manageable than one huge one and are much easier to dip in and out of.
- Establish prior knowledge so that users are not having to sit through

> When am I going to fit this in?

content they already know; or give them the option to jump ahead.
- Make sure you are providing the information that the learners *must* know, and cut or separate out anything that is just 'nice to have'. If you feel like you cannot remove this extra information completely, provide it as optional resources. This is one of the main challenges I have found with SMEs — they want to tell the learner *everything* — and it is rarely necessary.
- Make it clear how long the overall course and the individual sections are. Also, make sure the learner can see where they are up to at all times — whether through a menu, progress bar or clearly marked sections.

2. Motivation

Let's face it, we've all done one of 'those' courses — where we

> It's just a tick box exercise

have sat through some training that we saw as totally unnecessary. This is a popular complaint with work-based learning when the imperative to do it is often for compliance or legislative reasons; resulting in employees being unable to see a clear connection to how it impacts them.

> This isn't relevant to me

With a few simple developments, not only can the learning be more enjoyable for the learner, but it can be more interesting for us as developers to create. Avoid learning experiences that are just a rehashed PowerPoint textbook, recreated for screen, or endless bullet points and multiple choice questions.

To help increase motivation you can:
- Make sure you are explaining why the learning is relevant to the learner — other than they have to do it to tick a box or comply with legal requirements.

> Why do I have to do this?

Clearly explain the benefit to the learner, or others, of completing the course.

> *It's so boring*

- Create scenarios that they can relate to and make it emotive.
- Add personalisation to make it feel like you are talking to them directly.
- Mix it up, keep them interested by including lots of different types of media and questioning them.

> *I only did this 12 months ago*

- If the topic allows, make it lighthearted. Get some humour in there, provide some fun exercises for knowledge checks, and encourage collaboration with colleagues.
- Find the appropriate tone of voice — not too authoritative, nor patronising. Find that middle balance and write like you would talk. Make it conversational.

> *There is no benefit for me completing this*

- Add movement with animations, video or effects. But don't go overboard! You can equally kill it with too much whizzy stuff. And don't confuse this with interactivity…
- Include interactions which will make them think and apply

> *This had better be worth it*

the learning to their lives/work. Make them see the connection to what they do and why it is important.
- Add rewards for completion — badges, levels, points, certificates etc. Any aspects of gamification will help here.

For example, a company says that all employees must complete annual health and safety training. The staff regularly complain that it is not their job to do this and they know how to pick up a box safely, make sure a wire isn't running across a footpath, etc. Plus they only did this 12 months ago — why do they have to do it again?

By using the company's specific data on absences and accidents in the workplace, the implicated costs, photos of their actual office environment, and examples of issues that have been spotted, you can make the content immediately more relatable. It can emphasise either why their specific workplace needs to be safer, or even better if they have an impeccable record — how to keep it that way and the benefits that this provides to everybody.

3. Environment

Do you know in what environment the learners are likely to be completing the course? And have you checked that this is actually the case? No presumptions!

The learner could be completing the course in a busy office where they are repeatedly interrupted by phones and colleagues, at home with their toddler crawling over them and demanding snacks, whilst multitasking in their lunch hour, or on a packed train whilst travelling to see customers or commuting. Anywhere where they find 20, or maybe even just five minutes, to fit a bit of the learning in.

We often design with the ideal environment in mind - a lovely quiet office with no distractions and plenty of time on hand, or a lovely cosy home office with a door to the world closed. In reality this is (very) rarely the case. As you are designing, consider the alternatives. What would a stressed out work-at-home mum find difficult in that section you have just created?

> *I have to complete any self development on the train in a morning; it's the only time I get to myself*

How would a young millennial feel trying to watch that video with no subtitles on a packed, delayed commuter train surrounded by irate, flustered people.

Here's how you can help provide an easier experience:
- Create resources and takeaways with the key points that can be revisited later.
- Provide audio and subtitles for those who may not have access to headphones or are in a noisy environment.
- Consider animations or dialogue between characters, to watch or listen to instead of reading a wall of text.
- Allow them to easily navigate back through the course if something needs to be recapped later.
- Again, think about microlearning and breaking the course down into smaller units that can be complete in 5-10 minutes at a time.
- Ensure your course is responsive so it can be used on different devices, especially phones and tablets.
- Ensure you have a good understanding of your end users and how/when they are likely to access the learning. Are they doing it for personal reasons and so are likely to do it at home? Will they access it from a company intranet and so be on site? Are they employees who travel a lot for work and so often complete compulsory learning on trains?
- You can also create learner personas that guide your development and can then be used to test your learning. Get into a character's mindset and experience the learning as someone else.

4. Language

This can be one of the biggest barriers to learning if you do not get it correct. You should ensure that you write as the learner would write or speak — break down the jargon, remove the many acronyms (provide glossaries if you must keep them in) and find the appropriate tone of voice.

> *I don't get much time to complete my learning at home*

> *I sit in an open plan office and it gets quite noisy*

I don't understand half of it

As the designer you are the middle ground between the SME, the potentially complicated content, and the user who just wants to understand the information quickly and move on. There can be some fear both on yours and the SME's behalf that by taking certain terms or vocabulary out, some meaning will be lost. But consider this — if you present the high level content, then many learners run the risk of not understanding anything at all.

It takes ages to read; it's so complicated

English is not my first language, and this is very difficult to translate

Studies have shown that "even highly educated online readers crave succinct information that is easy to scan" (Nielson Norman 2017). Think about it — if you read lots of heavy-going information daily in your job (think lawyer or scientist for example), you would be grateful for some easier reading too.

If you are creating a course that will be translated into different languages, or used by non-native speakers, that brings in

There are so many acronyms; it takes me ages to keep looking up what they mean

a whole different set of considerations - average word length and ensuring enough space in the design to account for it, localisation and dialects, differences in cultural interpretations of images and information, variances in direction of reading, and much more. This is a whole separate article in itself!

So here are some tips to help you create a readable language for all:

- Make sure you know before you begin if the course is to be translated or localised.
- Consider your tone of voice and how it is appropriate to both the content, the audience and how they will be feeling when completing your learning (stressed, anxious, calm, motivated, etc).
- Is it written in the language of the user, not the SME? The language should be easily understandable for all, with a reading age of approximately 9 years old (the national average).
- Use plain language to increase readability. See the Readability Guidelines project from Content Design London for some great research-proven pointers and advice on the most common words, sentence length, using specialist terms and much more. This is a great resource to help support your fight for plain language too!
- Use a glossary to explain any terms that may be unfamiliar, acronyms that must be included, or to clarify words that could be misinterpreted if they have more than one meaning (especially if there are likely to be non-fluent learners).
- Avoid use of metaphors, Latin, and too many specialised terms.

- Use websites like the Hemingway tool or Readable to check the level of your content and use of plain language.

5. Cost

This had better be worth it

There are two types of cost implication — those on us as the developers to stick within budgets, and those on the customer purchasing the course. It is easy as the developing company to get caught up in the former; however here we are specifically looking at the latter. The learner may have a lot riding on this.

I am not sure this is the right one for me

Cost can be a significant pain point in a learner's journey if they need to pay for the course(s) themselves, rather than it being at their employer's cost. This can especially be the case if multiple qualifications are needed, for example, for a potential career changer or new business owner. It becomes a significant commitment for the individual and a lot could be riding on it. It also increases the emotions and stress involved.

I need to make sure I have the correct qualification at the end of this

Cost implications can also mean there is a higher expectation that the course will deliver not just what is needed, and what is promised, but go beyond that and provide a true feeling of value. Often, learners may be willing to pay more for an accredited course, rather than a generic off the shelf version, but again, they must feel the value in doing so. If they cannot afford the accredited one they

I really need to do this course to open my business but I don't have much money 'funds'

desire, this can create despondent feelings towards the course they end up purchasing and in turn, this affects their motivation.

Though this is mostly in the control of the customer, there are things you can still do to help:

- Ensure you clearly explain the benefits of the learning and a realistic set of expectations for the outcome. Do not overpromise. Check that the course description is accurate.
- Provide the sense of value for money — quality design, good levels of interaction, variety of media used, takeaway resources. etc.
- Provide a variety of options for price levels — could you provide a basic and an advanced version? Or break down into levels so that those only needing a basic introduction can do so, and those who wish to can go deeper.
- Explain the benefits of the investment they are making (such as lifetime access, customer support, takeaway resources, etc).

6. Other barriers

All of the points above can be classed as barriers, but there are also many more that can affect your learners. So let's take a look at some of the other pain points that can appear and don't fit neatly under the other categories.

In e-learning barriers can be anything that prevents a learner from successfully starting or completing their learning, or hinders their progress — for example, a lack of confidence, out of date technology, short attention spans, or a learning disability.

We're not just talking about accessibility here either, though that is a significant factor. There are many people (myself included) who struggle to read lots of text on screen. I just cannot concentrate on the information like I can with a paper version and will often print things out to highlight and scribble on it if it is information I need to absorb. And I'm not the only one out there.

It is harder to suggest fixes here, as the barriers could be so wide ranging, but some general pointers to help a range of issues are:

- Use a variety of media in the presentation and clear instructions of how to navigate their use. Not everyone has the same experience and knowledge of technologies such as podcasts, animations, Wiki pages and video (all of which may be included in the material).
- Help to reduce the learner's fear of failure - make it a safe environment to fail, and to put the learning into practice.
- Use accessibility features and work to WCAG[1] standards to make the learning available for all.
- Use clear, consistent navigation throughout — don't make them have to do the leg work in working out what to do. The learner should not have to think when it comes to navigation.

References

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The key learning point for us here is that e-learning is not a 'one size fits all'. Best practice will vary depending on many different project factors, so what worked well for one project may not work so well for the next. It is for this reason that templates can often be difficult to effectively adapt across a number of projects.

We need to start understanding not just who our audience are, but their frustrations, daily challenges, the feelings they bring to the learning, and so much more. Just because we are not in a classroom with them, those influencing factors are not removed. They are just out of our sight.

Put yourself in their shoes and remember,

"The content you produce isn't for you." C

[1] WCAG. Web Content Accessibility Guidelines. www.w3.org/WAI/standards-guidelines/wcag

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