How to Eliminate Sources of Frustration for the Online Learner

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Learning online can be frustrating. Online tools and technologies have a learning curve. It's easy to feel lost and disconnected. Answers to questions are typically delayed. Because the online learning experience is, by its nature, somewhat frustrating, we need to take as much *unnecessary frustration* out of the experience as we can. Why? Because this kind of frustration often leads to reduced satisfaction and learning, and increased attrition. These less-than-optimal outcomes aren't in anyone's best interest.

In this article, I will discuss common but unnecessary frustrations for online learners—and how they can be reduced or eliminated.

Typical sources of unnecessary frustration

Steve Krug, in his excellent Web usability primer, *Don't Make Me Think*, describes typical website frustrations and explains that it's not "rocket surgery" to make them less frustrating. Folks who sell online (such as Amazon.com and SmartBargains.com, my two favorite online shopping sites) clearly recognize the importance of usability because usability directly impacts sales. Frustrated folks simply don't stick around long enough to buy. Too hard to use? One or two clicks and they can land on another site that is easier to use.

But what about online learners?

They typically don't have the luxury of immediately going elsewhere, and unnecessary frustration is very hard to deal with while also trying to learn and fulfill course requirements.

Along with usability problems, extraneous cognitive load and unnecessary mental effort needed to deal with the learning environment can cause unnecessary frustrations for online learners. When the mental effort needed for dealing with unnecessary frustration rises, the amount left for learning tasks is reduced.

For example, imagine reading online course content about stratified random sampling (a statistical sampling method). The content contains links to other pages with graphical representations of the topics being covered. Needing to flip back and forth between graphic and text explanations requires much more mental effort than if the graphics and corresponding explanation are placed together.

Here's the bottom line: If learners can't easily find what they need, what they need isn't available (even though you know where it is). If learners are frustrated and cannot easily use and learn from the course materials, the materials are ineffective or worse.

Follow the clues

How do we know if learners are unnecessarily frustrated? There are two typical clues: Complaints about

difficulty accessing or using the course materials and lack of engagement or effort (for example, limited log-ins, few discussion postings, late or inadequately completed assignments). Complaints often help uncover unnecessary frustrations. Lack of engagement or effort can be caused by myriad 'outside' issues (such as family or work problems) but they can also indicate learners who have shut down from frustration.

The first semester I was an online instructor, one learner waited three weeks into the semester to ask me how to find the course discussions I kept referring to. Huh? I could have written this off as a bizarre occurrence but thankfully I didn't because I received a similar email the week before. With the learner on the phone, I followed what she was looking at and realized that the link to course discussions might not be obvious to new online learners because I referred to them as course discussions throughout the course content but the course management system referred to them as discussion forums. That was enough to trip up some new online learners. I changed the content so the term used was the same.

The first step to reducing unnecessary frustrations is to be open to the fact that they are likely to be there. The table below describes some general ways to address and prevent them.

Clue: Complaints about difficulty accessing or using the course materials

Things to do:
- Clearly explain how learners should get started and make this information easy to use (a checklist is good) and easily noticed.
- Make commonly used items (like

the syllabus and assignment directions and rubrics) very easy to locate.

- Obtain a student account to see what learners see (I always set one of these up for this purpose).
- Develop and use a consistent course structure so once learners learn how to use one online course, they know how to use others, even though the content may be different.
- If learners are reporting problems, ask them for specific details (so you can troubleshoot).
- Connect learners to campus technical support, as needed. (Following-up with the learner is a good idea.)
- Make changes to the materials to address common concerns and use announcements or broadcast emails to make learners aware of these changes.

- Keep an ongoing list of changes that need to be made in the future so these problems don't reoccur.

Clue: Lack of engagement or effort
Things to do:

- Design a low stress, fun initial activity to help learners learn the tools and feel connected. (I like course scavenger hunts for this purpose.)
- Quickly contact individual learners who don't appear to be engaged by phone (best) or email.
- Check in with individual learners periodically to solicit feedback about what is going well/less well and why. (Learners regularly tell me how valuable this is.)

Your turn

Find someone who hasn't seen your online course and ask them to do typical course tasks on your course website (for example, print the syllabus, determine what assignments are due in the first week, post a bio in the discussion forum) while you watch but without your help. Ask them to think out loud so you know what they are thinking and why they are doing what they are doing. See where they are confused and how many steps it takes to get it right. If you can keep yourself from helping them, you'll learn a lot about what may be unnecessarily frustrating.

When learners can't find what they need or are confused about where to go and what to do, we are inadvertently making it harder for them to learn. That's a situation that needs to be remedied if we want learners to be successful.

Resources

Krug, S. (2006). *Don't make me think: A common sense approach to web usability*, 2nd Edition. Berkeley, CA: New Riders Press

Excerpt from: ***Special Report: Online Course Design: 13 Strategies for Teaching in a Web-based Distance Learning Environment.*** Retrieved from the Faculty Focus website: http://www.facultyfocus.com/free-reports/online-course-design-13-strategies-for-teaching-in-a-web-based-distance-learning-environment/