



Why User Experience Design is Critical to Driving and Maintaining User Engagement and Motivation for Online and Mobile Educational Tools

Susan O'Brien¹

Abstract

Digital learning experiences are coming of age and as more users around the world begin to embrace online and mobile learning, it is imperative that educational product development incorporates User Experience (UX) design to ensure high levels of user engagement.

Innovative ICT products can be successful for two reasons:

- 1. They offer increased efficiencies of scale to both students and teachers*
- 2. They offer an engaging experience that students are inclined to return to, and teachers will find easy to manage, deploy and moderate*

The problem, however, is that despite the increase in availability of emerging technologies, UX has seen little adoption in educational products when compared to the lauded position that it holds in the tech consumer industry. The benefits are multiple for both teachers and students.

Most users can recognize poor design, but good design, is not merely effective implementation of colors and visuals, but rather is the designing of a seamless experience so that the user may successfully navigate that product and learn from it.

The challenge for students is twofold: procrastination and lack of engagement. Creating and delivering a thoughtful User Experience eliminates some of those obstacles for student motivation and adoption, especially in the context of foreign language learning.

This presentation will propose the implications for use and adoption of UX as a key component in educational product development as UX has not, as a function, received sufficient recognition for the role it plays in determining the success of an educational product and future adoption levels by teachers and students.

We will explain the benefits to the stakeholders (students and teachers), and highlight how adoption of these advances in learning technologies will create a new culture of digital learning and assure positive impact on Elearning methodologies and the emerging EdTech space.

Digital learning experiences are coming of age. As more users around the world begin to embrace online and mobile learning, it is imperative that educational product development incorporates User Experience (UX) design to ensure high levels of user engagement.

Innovative ICT products can be successful provided they provide two types of experiences:

- They offer an engaging experience that students are inclined to return to, and teachers will find easy to manage, deploy and moderate
- They offer increased efficiencies of scale to both students and teachers

The problem, however, is that despite the increase in availability of emerging technologies, UX has seen little adoption in educational products when compared to the position UX holds in the broader consumer technology industry.

UX has become a hot topic in the tech consumer industry in recent years. Given the new frictionless user experiences created by brands like Uber and Open Table, UX has created a new standard of UX expectations among consumers. That's why UX in nearly all consumer-facing products is called out when the experience fails to live up to expectations. The consumer tech industry has recognized this new normal, and UX has fast become a critical part of the product development journey and an integral part of the design process from initial product conception.

¹ Smigin, United States



How do you know good UX design? Most end users can recognize poor design, but good design is more challenging. Good UX design is not merely effective implementation of colors and visuals, but rather the design of a seamless, intuitive experience where the user is able to easily and successfully navigate the product and benefit from its offering.

Good UX design is only about two things – the user, and the entire experience that user has with the product. At the end of the day people never forget how you make them feel. That's true of one-on-one personal interactions, but it's equally true of how users experience your digital products when interacting with them. Users experience products on two levels. First is how effective the product is for them (it works). Second is how they respond emotionally to the product (it feels good or not). Factors that impact UX include usability, effectiveness, ease of navigation, accessibility and design.

Let's look at an example that shows two polar opposite experiences for a 'student' learning a new language through a digital product.

Example 1 is the more traditional approach to digital educational product development. It includes the dreaded 'feature creep' where curriculum and product designers and developers believe the more information provided at the outset and at any given time the greater the benefit to the student. From the outset, the user is bombarded with rules of engagement, complex instructions, confusing layouts and clunky interfaces. Frustration reigns, and the student engages with the product reluctantly and only out of necessity.

Example 2 begins with a welcome message or a simple hello, and reassures the user that this is a simple journey, one that they will be guided through. It encourages them to just get started and learn as they go. This alternate approach pulls the user in gradually, speaks to them on a personal level, and provides only the necessary information or instruction pertinent to what is happening at a given moment. It strips away clutter, removes obstacles, simplifies the user journey, and presents an opportunity for gradual onboarding.

Which version would you prefer to use?

UX is particularly important for platforms, websites or applications that require high levels of interaction where users will return again and again. What your site or application looks like visually is utterly irrelevant if your users don't understand how to engage with it intuitively. Performance – from the user's frame of reference – is significantly more important than pretty.

The challenge for students is twofold: procrastination and lack of engagement. Creating and delivering a thoughtful User Experience eliminates some of those obstacles for student motivation and adoption, especially in the context of foreign language learning. Good UX will create a path to a seamless, engaging experience where the student can navigate efficiently each and every time they engage with the product. This positive user experience not only breeds adoption, it fosters product loyalty and the desire to talk about it to friends and colleagues. That is every product's dream.

The reality is that users of digital educational products are real people, real students and real teachers all of whom engage with a variety of digital products and platforms in all areas of their lives. They are exposed to great UX in a plethora of digital products in all manner of environments. They conduct much of their banking on a website or mobile app, they use Gmail or another intuitive email product, they keep up with friends on Facebook and they plan vacations on online booking sites. Today's students including Millennials and Generation Z'ers have grown up with mobile and tablet. They know good UX intuitively and won't tolerate anything else. Anything but a product with good UX will not see mass adoption, and will be impossible to scale. Their daily digital lives go beyond email, banking and Facebook. They use Snapchat to document and share their lives on video, Tinder to select potential dates, Quizlet to increase their knowledge of trivia, and spend downtime on any number of gaming apps.

Why then do educational product developers believe that anything less than an optimal digital user experience will be accepted? In truth, students don't have a choice in terms of the educational platforms they engage with as they are selected by governing committees. Just as they are informed of the text books they must read from so too are they pointed in the direction of selected digital platforms.

The future of education however, must change. In nearly every other sector of their lives users have more choice than ever before, and are demanding better experiences. The future of educational product development needs to become more flexible. Products need to become more user friendly as developers embrace UX and focus on more intuitive User Interfaces and User Journeys. Educational products need to be more customizable.



Teachers, too, are embracing technology that reduces their workload. They recognize that a product that better engages students will have a greater chance of adoption and make the learning experience more fluid and ultimately more successful for the student. Teachers are adopting digital products to help encourage increased extra curricular engagement by students. If an online tool or application can help students engage more effectively and more frequently, then homework becomes less cumbersome and less intimidating. The goal is clear – offer users a better experience and they will reward you with loyalty to the product.

Silicon Valley investor and serial entrepreneur Marc Andreessen famously stated that there are two additional industries ripe for innovation: Health Care and Education. His belief is that these industries will be and need to be disrupted by software. Disruption occurs when consumers have more choice. Those consumers are teachers and students. Increasingly teachers are telling schools and boards what they want. Increasingly students are telling teachers what they want.

In the context of foreign language learning, it is clear to see the overwhelming benefits of embracing UX for product development. Learning another language can be challenging. Traditional curricula are structured and rigid with a strong focus on grammar from the outset. Grammar and linguistic structure are necessary parts of foreign language instruction, but UX can highlight the emerging point of view that asks the question as to whether or not they are the right place to start

Imagine two possible scenarios.

Scenario one sees the student begin to learn a language with a predetermined course layout. The student is guided through a series of instructions and exercises with a focus on verb conjugations and grammatical structures. Rules are recited and committed to memory, just like it always has done.

Scenario two offers the student some level of choice and relates everything that is being learned to real life application. Conversation is a focus from the outset. The programme speaks to the user and highlights just how useful this content is in how it relates to real life in another country. The product communicates with the student, offers choices in terms of what can be learned next, and puts the student in control of the entire experience. Grammatical structures are certainly taught, but they are communicated in such a way as to be less intimidating, creating a confidence in the student's ability, thus inspiring the student to want to know and learn more.

Language is social and contextual. It is entirely possible to create and develop language learning products that are more user friendly and thus more likely to succeed by seeing greater adoption by students and teachers alike.

The future of education lies in innovation. Innovative products will engage students, support teachers, and realign educational goals with those of the people engaging with their products. Disruptive innovation can empower teachers and students to learn and grow in new ways. Embracing User Experience in development of educational products will be key to the success of future products. Good UX can help foster a new culture of digital learning, enhancing the experience for all those involved in this new, emerging EdTech space.