Recognizing Barriers in Online Language Learning

In online environments, it may not always be obvious when one of your language learners is experiencing a significant barrier to learning. Because of the distance and asynchronicity involved in accessing the online space, learners are often at the screen alone while they engage with the course. When they encounter barriers that affect their access to the course or content, it may increase their feelings of isolation and leave them with a sense of frustration.

In language learning programs, learners bring their own cultural backgrounds and values into the shared online space. The potential for miscommunication is high in multicultural online spaces where participants cannot rely on visual communication cues such as facial expression, tone, and body language to help bridge the cultural communication gap.

When course design and navigation are problematic, users will often blame themselves and their own lack of knowledge or experience rather than seek help. Some learners will have pre-existing notions that online learning is and should be difficult and full of small frustrations. Learners may ultimately not even realize the barriers that are impairing their ability to learn, resulting in extended periods of inaccessibility to certain areas of the online space or to certain course content.

When you notice that your learners might be experiencing a barrier to learning, sending a quick email or direct message, or making a phone call to check in with them might be worthwhile, even if only to let them know you are available and attentive to their presence.

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On the next pages are descriptions of signs that an online language learner might be experiencing a barrier to learning.

Signs of Barriers

Lack of participation

An absence of participation is a common problem in online learning. Interaction and achievement at the start of a course will help to motivate the learner in these situations.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR:

- a learner does not log into the course space
- a learner logs in but does not do anything in the course
- a learner submits minimal coursework and minimal discussion
- a learner is late to complete or hand in an assignment

SOURCES OF THE PROBLEM:

Busy schedule
Learners' busy lives or over-commitment in enrolling in the course might make it difficult for them to find time to participate.

Workload is too heavy
Learners may be using the majority of their dedicated study time for reading content and for reading and writing discussion posts.

Navigation is confusing
A learner may not know where to click when entering the course.

Course expectations are unclear
A learner may be confused about the purpose of the course or an activity.

Self-conscious about language
Learners may feel that their language is "on display" in an online space and be reluctant to use written text.

The timing of learners' access
A learner may only be accessing the course space at set times during the week, making it difficult to contribute to discussion and to meet deadlines.

ACTIONS:

Communicate language requirements
State and restate any language requirements such as accuracy and fluency expectations. Remind learners to find a balance between accuracy and fluency, and that mistakes are ok to make and even essential for learning. If learners focus on writing "error-free" this will increase their workload significantly.

Check-in communication
Contact at the start of the course will be motivating for learners and can dispel any worries they may have. In an email, you may want to ask learners general questions about their technology use and what they think of the online space. This may provide the prompt that they need to bring up some issues that they have been struggling with.

Post a message to the class
If you notice several learners lack significant participation in the course, you may want to send a group email or post a message in the course announcements. Information on time management might ease learners' stress about the amount of content they need to engage with. Reinforce that you are available to discuss flexible due dates and workload management.

Alter course scheduling
You may want to revisit the timing for assignment due dates to accommodate when learners tend to be online and accessing the course. You could also extend discussions to include a longer period of time, allowing learners more time to post and respond to posts. Encourage learners to visit the course space more frequently, but for shorter amounts of time.

Unused course spaces

Sections of the online space may be less popular than you intended or expected. Being explicit and posting reminders about these spaces will help learners realize the usefulness of these underused spaces.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR:

- lack of activity in a discussion forum or other online tool
- unanswered direct messages

SOURCES OF THE PROBLEM:

Unaware of course space
Learners may have skipped over information about a feature of the course space, or they may have missed instructions for an activity.

Space is not needed

A certain feature that you designed may not actually be needed or useful to learners.

Clarify the instructions

See if you can reframe any instructions, or more explicitly state the expectations for how learners can use the space.

ACTIONS:

Post reminders

Language learners in text-heavy environments will use a large capacity of their cognitive load on language alone. Continual reminders about course spaces, especially features of the course that are not specifically a part of the curriculum (e.g., a General Discussion forum), will help your learners keep these course spaces in mind.

Reconsider the space

It may be that the feature you designed is a nice idea, but just not useful in this context. Consider the low popularity of a particular course space as useful feedback, and make note for when you design the next version of your course or activity.

Inappropriate behavior

Learners may digress far off topic, discuss personal information, and post inappropriate content. This type of behavior could make it uncomfortable for others in the class to participate. Reminding learners about netiquette and cyber safety guidelines, and discussing cultural and professional norms with them in private communication will help them to adjust their behavior.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR:

- excessive digression from course topics
- a learner asking for private email or social media contact information
- a learner posting photos, videos, or links to media unrelated to the course

SOURCES OF THE PROBLEM:

Lack of online experience

Either a lack of experience in online learning or simply a lack of experience online may make the learner unaware about common practices of online communication.

Difference of cultural communication

In their own culture, the behavior may be appropriate; however, this behavior may not transfer well to the culture that the course takes place in, or it may not transfer well into an online environment.

ACTIONS:

Guide learners back on topic

Learners will expect guidance from the course facilitator when they digress off topic. Jump into any discussions that have digressed too far and guide them back or suggest that they take their discussion into the General Discussion forum.

Post reminders about netiquette and cyber safety information

Use an announcement post or a class email to send a reminder about netiquette and cyber safety information. If needed, include links to more extensive information on the subject.

Respond directly to inappropriate behavior

Post a gentle but direct response to any inappropriate behavior, stating why it is unacceptable. Since you expect learners in your online space to learn by observing each other, it is important to respond visibly to inappropriate behavior so that it is not copied.

Communicate privately

If a learner has been inappropriate, communicate with the individual directly to ensure that he/she has seen your comments. Try to explain any cultural or professional practices that you feel the learner might be unaware of.

Technical problems

You may notice some learners having difficulties with some of the smaller details of the online space, such as posting broken links, not being able to post photos, and not being able to download course material. This may provide a window on a learner's digital literacy proficiency, and may be a symptom of bigger issues involving technology.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR:

- A learner posting about his/her sense of confusion
- A learner posting broken links, or other small technical problems involved with the learner's post
- A learner not being able to access course material, or discussing frustration with trying to access course material

SOURCES OF THE PROBLEM:

Unaware of support material

Learners may have missed or forgotten about relevant support documents.

Lack of digital literacy skills

Digital literacy skills do not always transfer over from one platform or technology to another. A learner may still be getting used to the smaller nuances of navigating this particular online space.

Language confusion

The learner may be struggling to comprehend some of the language used in the course or some of the language used in the interface or the course technology.

ACTIONS:

Post reminders about support material

Continual reminders about support materials and their location will help your learners keep the availability of these documents in their mind. Directly link to any support materials in your reminder posts as well. You may find that you need to add to your existing support materials, or provide a model of how to solve a common technical problem.

Post reminders about contact information and office hours

Continual reminders about your contact information and availability will also help your learners to keep this information at the forefront of their mind.

Elicit information from other classmates

You may want to ask a particularly tech-savvy learner to jump in and help another learner, especially if the learner has directly asked for help either to you or to the class as a whole. Additionally, you may want to create a short activity to poll the class for technology "tips and tricks" that they use on their own. This is a useful collaborative activity that combines language skill and digital skill development.

Direct communication

Check in directly with any learner who has demonstrated a few technological problems. Check their language skill assessment that you have on record and any past communication you have from them. If you suspect that language level might be an issue, ask them how the course is going and how they feel about the language used in the class.