What learners value

We asked over a hundred thousand learners about their experience on FutureLearn. This is what they shared...

Content

Learners love 'great content'. They expect high quality, are looking for it to be 'interesting', 'easy to understand', 'informative' and 'useful'.

Craft the volume of content compared to the advertised learning hours. Ensure the content you make is authentic as high quality is often linked to real people, clear structure and quality media.

Level

When the level of the course is 'right for me' the learners are most satisfied. The level is positive when it's 'good' 'perfect' 'appropriate' and 'high level'

Lower level courses can be frustrating, learners are most negative when the level is 'higher than they expected'. Plan from the start and maintain the level during design and production. Still challenge learners as they work through the course.

Introduction

Learners look for courses that are a 'great', 'good', 'interesting' or 'useful' introduction to the topic. Introductions should be for a broader audience.

If your course is an introduction ensure it stays that way throughout. The course pitch / level sets expectations with learners that it will be a suitable introduction to the topic / theme.

Videos

Learners really 'love the videos' in courses. They are looking for 'high quality', 'accessible' videos that are 'interesting', 'helpful' and 'clear'.

Quantity and style of videos can be off-putting - 'too few videos' is a turn off on most courses. Learners ask for more, not fewer videos. Avoid too many talking heads, make use of the medium.

Experience

Learners regularly report a 'great', 'good', 'nice' 'enjoyable' and 'practical' experience. 'Thoroughly enjoyed the experience' comes up regularly.

Design around your target audience, and ensure this remains key through course production and marketing. Build a memorable learning experience that can be applied to their own lives.

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These characteristics were identified by a machine learning powered analysis of over 2 million words in Course Reviews.

Learning

Similar to Experience, learners love to share that they had a 'great learning experience' that it was 'good learning', they 'love learning' that it was 'enjoyable' 'easy' and 'interesting' learning.

Not 'learning much' comes up occasionally but learners are generally positive when directly mentioning their learning. It is a key outcome (vs. entertainment, for example), keep it that way!

Material

Like Content, learners seek quality course materials. Successful courses provide 'excellent', 'good', 'interesting', 'useful' 'easy to understand' and 'relevant' course material.

Avoid outdated material. Ensure constructive alignment and keep course materials consistently aligned to the level. Maintain a presentation style and keep it authentic.

Opportunity

Your course is an opportunity to explore a topic. Learners tell us taking a course was a 'great' opportunity and they 'appreciate' or 'loved' the opportunity the course 'gave' them.

Consider the opportunities presented to learners to engage and interact. Ensure you're building plenty of practice. Balance activities across. discussions, interactive exercises and assessments.

Students

Learners call themselves students as well as their own students (as teachers) or their peers. Learners want to with, and for, others (see People). The top keyword is 'recommend'.

Design various forms of human interaction into activities (active - comment and passive - read). Encourage recommendations and how to apply specific outcomes outside the course.

Teachers

Learners want 'great teachers' and will 'highly recommend this course' because of the educators. They are positive about 'experienced' and 'very clear' educators.

Educator presence is critical. Learner expectations for educator presence can be set early in the course. The 'voice of the educator' (in media, feedback) is perfectly acceptable for any low or no facilitation course.

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Characteristics mentioned in reviews were grouped by common themes then ranked by frequency.

Examples

'Practical', 'good', 'great', 'real life', 'clear' and 'interesting' examples drive a huge amount of positive feedback from learners.

None, or too few, examples were the source of negative sentiment from learners. Weaving real world examples into the content stands out as most important for learners.

Links

'Great', 'useful', 'good' and 'interesting' links are 'appreciated' and 'very helpful' for learners. Learners value links within courses to other sections,

Provide links for extra resources, use them appropriately. Add as additional content for interested learners to explore deeper. Broken links cause frustration and need checking regularly.

People

Learners enjoy learning with 'different; or 'wonderful' people to learn with and who are 'interested' in the same topics. Learners 'would recommend' your course to others.

Make all people highly visible. Design people into the content and the social activities, ensuring everyone in the course is surfaced regularly

Overview

Learner opinions share that successful courses provided a 'good', 'great', 'comprehensive', 'useful', 'broad' and 'general' overview of the topic.

Avoid generalist, introductory courses that then become very specific once inside the course. Some learners report the 'overview' was a 'bit basic' and didn't go into enough detail - which can be made clear before enrolment.

Tips

Learner's value the course content when it contains 'practical' and 'useful' tips which are 'great', 'good', 'helpful' and 'valuable'.

Tips create an engaging learner experience, maximise tips during course creation process and use them to surface learning during and outside of the course. Tips can be used to top/tail the week as actionable takeaways or outcomes.

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Appearing in high volume doesn't mean we do them perfectly. We collect and share so we can all act on feedback.

Subject

Learners report it was a 'very interesting subject', a 'good overview of the subject' and that it was 'excellent', 'fascinating' 'recommended' and 'important' to them.

Be sure to have consistency in the subject, clarity from the moment they enrol through to completion. Make it exciting, share your passion, connect with your learners over the topics and bring it to life through media and activities.

Understanding

Clear value from learners who want to improve their understanding of the topic.

Make the description clear, keep learning outcomes descriptive (avoid 'understand') and if a number of learners might not finish everything, put one key take away early in the course.

Endnote

These top course characteristics were created from analysis of FutureLearn open course reviews created by learners and share publicly during 2020/21. They are being shared as an open resource for educators, learning designers, course developers and anyone else who is anyone building or revising effective learning experiences.

The full analysis was published June 2021 and is available via the FutureLearn Insights Blog https://www.futurelearn.com/info/insights