How to Improve Your Online Course (and Increase Student Engagement)



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Seek and ye shall find — but only if you make the effort. An online course can monetize one's expertise, expand influence and publish content that helps others. An expert on virtually any subject can leverage any of the following: PDFs, live Q&A sessions, YouTube videos, speeches, presentations, podcasts, published research and more.

There's a serious challenge to this, though: Much like New Year's resolutions that quickly get abandoned, most eager learners buy a course and never actually complete it. They take two steps forward and permanently stop, which may lead

prospective students to question the course creator's competency, communication skills and/or credibility.

For massive open online courses (MOOCs), the dropout rate can be extreme. A 2019 M.I.T. study found that 96 percent of students drop out of MOOCs over a five-year period. A different study in 2015 found the completion rate at a mere 5 to 15 percent.

Why is this, exactly? Well, would-be learners purchase a course based on desire or impulse, but many balk at hard work. This undermines an expert's abilities. It harms reputations and future entrepreneurial undertakings. A corporate client won't hire you as a speaker or trainer if audiences tune out, stare at their phones and rush out for lunch only to never come back. Moreover, a student who never finishes a course certainly won't recommend it and won't get the results they claim to seek.

People disengage for many reasons. Expectations change. They forget. Family gets in the way. Boredom sets in — there's a myriad of excuses, really. As a course creator, however, it remains your job to answer the following: How can I make my course appealing enough to the point of widespread completion?

Fortunately, there are a few things you can do.

1. Be extremely prepared

Many experts are tempted to "wing it" because of the vast knowledge they possess. However, doing things this way will make your course disorganized and unprofessional. And novices won't learn as much as they could have if you would've properly prepared. If you truly want to help others, be more effective with your course's preparation.

And I mean it — prepare your material weeks in advance. This includes talking points, slides, guest appearances,

interviews, statistics, sources, etc. You also need to kick any non-essential content to the curb, so as to make your course more digestible. Many won't understand unnecessarily complex ideas or jargon that audiences won't connect with. Simplicity enables learning and engagement. Resist the ego's urge to make things harder than they need to be.

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Students should continuously communicate and provide feedback. I recently spoke with Sean Castrina, an entrepreneur who hosts online business courses and advised, "Ask for questions in advance of new sections. If your next section is about team-building, ask attendees what they're looking to learn. And after the section is over, see if they actually learned it." In other words, check to see if you actually delivered on your students' expectations.

Push for immediate feedback when sharing content live, as audiences are able to ask questions and make comments in real-time. Give attendees a course evaluation sheet so they can rate your teaching ability and lesson presentation on factors such as communication skills, quality of materials and availability. These will identify areas for improvement and hopefully strengthen your long-term reputation as a bonafide course creator.

3. Get a live facilitator

Course facilitators work for course creators, but directly with students. If you have the budget, hire one. Facilitators provide one-on-one support, as well as observe how students are progressing. They really work wonders for enhancing the overall student experience and can hold students accountable, as well.

Furthermore, depending on your course's format, it may be

possible to hire a virtual assistant to help with engagement, such as answering emails and responding to students' questions or comments on social media.

The skinny of the situation? When you engage, your "classroom" will, too.

4. Encourage discussion

Create opportunities for attendees to learn from each other via group chat. Students can answer each other's questions, many of which – year after year, time and time again – will be repeated throughout the course. Satesh Bidaisee, a professor and assistant dean at St. George's University in Grenada, shared this key advice for online teachers with Inside Higher Ed: "While you cannot replicate the in-person back-and-forth of a classroom, encouraging students to utilize social media channels or set up virtual discussion groups to work together can help mimic that collaborative environment. This will motivate students to succeed and allow them to turn to each other as they work through the material."

Simple, easy-to-navigate discussion forums are made readily available through apps like Slack, Facebook, Quip and Zoom, bringing students together and creating a deeper, more meaningful sense of community.

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The big takeaway is to remember why you created your course in the first place. Initially, it was probably because you wanted to leverage your expertise to help others – and create a new source of revenue, of course. To ensure that this happens, organize your course materials. Look for (and welcome) feedback so you can tweak and optimize your coursework as you go, as well.

And, of course, if your budget will allow for it, hire a facilitator to help answer students' questions and encourage students to participate in discussions. They'll answer each other's questions, as well as bring up additional topics in class that could very well inspire a whole new course of yours for the coming months and years.

Remind people of the benefits of your online course, and hopefully they'll come back for more.

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