AARP

Free and Fee-Based Online Classes Can Expand Your Mind, Job Prospects

Whether for fun or your career, learn at your pace at your own place with on-demand courses
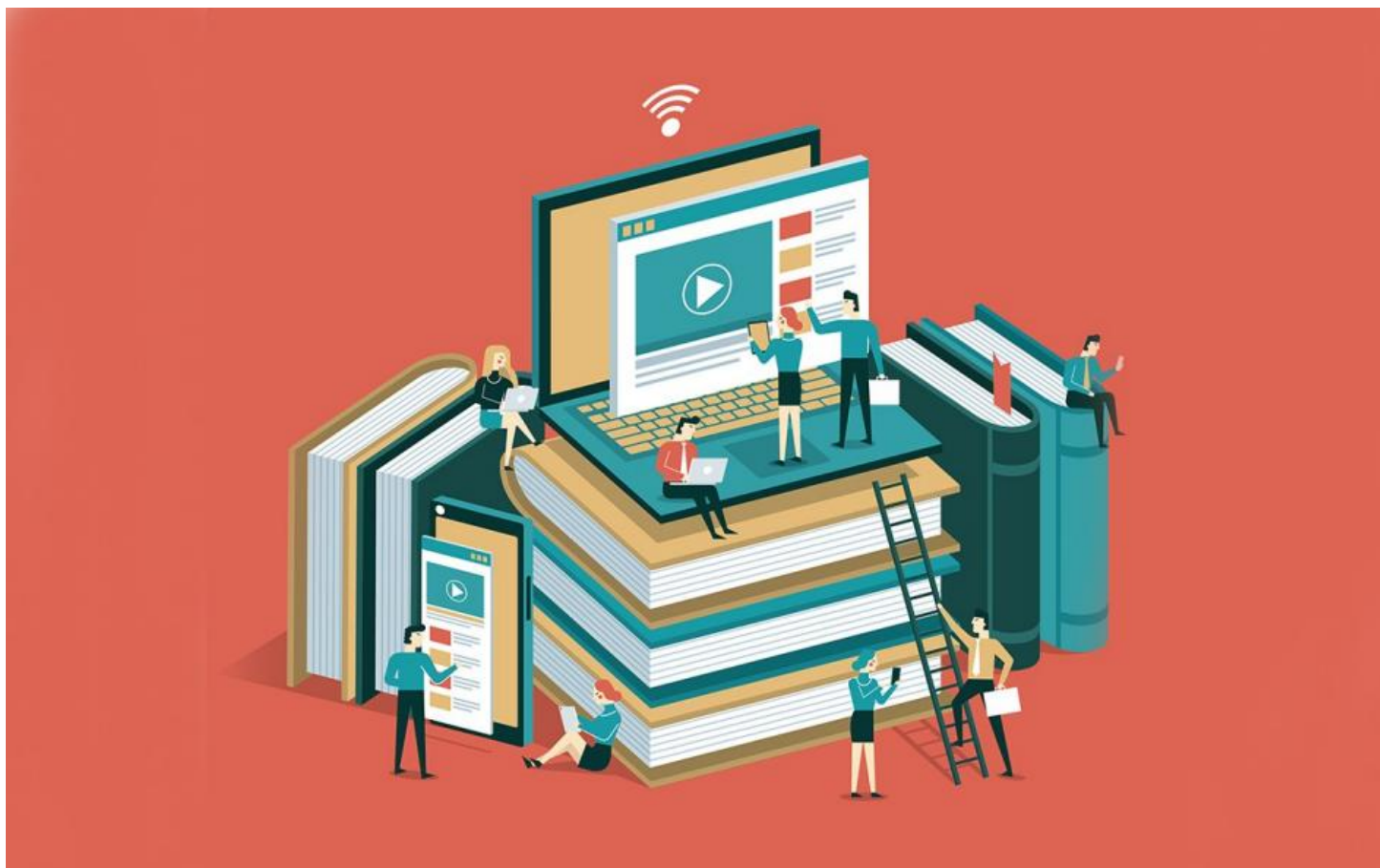
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By Edward C. Baig, AARP

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Online classes provided meaningful distractions for lifelong learners stuck at home during the height of the pandemic, but the learning hasn't stopped now that people are getting out again.

You can take classes on your smartphones, computers, tablets and streaming TVs on a world of subjects. Learn a foreign language, play piano, nourish hobbies, explore activities you've always been curious about or gain skills that may help you pursue a later-in-life career pivot.

Even better, many classes are free, though you probably will pay to earn certificates or "micro-credentials" tied to in-demand skills.

"If you want [a class] graded with feedback, there'll be some kind of fee for service," says Curt Bonk, an Indiana University learning, design and technology professor who cohosts the podcast *Silver Lining for Learning.*

On-demand learning changed the industry

The pandemic had a substantial effect on online learning, and not just for your college-age kids and grandkids. Online education company Coursera reports it had 46 million learners on its platform at the end of 2019. Then 30 million people joined its ranks in 2020 alone. Its total now has surpassed 118 million.

Some classes across the e-learning spectrum are offered in real time, but the majority are available on demand, many in conjunction with prestigious colleges and universities, as well as expert instructors at major companies.

Through massive open online courses, commonly called MOOCs, millions of people globally have gained access to curricula once reserved for students paying high-cost tuition. The courses number in the thousands and range in topics from artificial intelligence to digital photography.

Each course typically has a video of the lecturer speaking, related reading, quizzes and an online discussion forum. The number and length of classes vary.

At MOOC.org, an extension of an online course platform known as edX.org, you might search for courses in accounting or data science. If you want to understand blockchain technology, you can take a free, self-paced, three-week, three-hour-a-week IBM course through edX. If you want to study the use of machine learning in the Python programming language instead, Harvard offers a seven-week, 10- to 30-hour-a-week class on the topic, also free and self-paced, via edX.

Classes are 'less and less free'

In the early days, massive open online courses were mainly free. Large groups of enrollees took the courses together — hence the terms "open" and "massive" in the moniker. But the courses have evolved.

Though viewing video lectures typically remains free, certain elements such as getting access to quizzes and having assignments graded can be behind a paywall. For an extra fee, some providers offer credentialing, certificates or even a full degree.

"They're getting less and less free. That is [a] distinct trend and obviously one that's much needed," says Fiona Hollands, founder and managing director of EdResearcher. Her independent research firm covers educational programs, policies and practices.

Her reasoning: "You can't provide quality education for free." Online classes vary in quality, she says.

"But the same is true of in-person teaching," Hollands says. "I think the biggest issue is engagement. Can the screen hold your attention?"

Whether you're motivated to take online classes strictly for pleasure or to scoop up fresh skills to land a job, the outlets to choose from run the gamut. Some options:

Learning for pleasure

MasterClass. At this [celebrity-driven streaming](#) site, you can learn the drums from [ex-Beatle Ringo Starr](#), pick up restaurant-inspired recipes from chef Gordon Ramsay, get insights on value-driven leadership from retired Duke University basketball coach Mike "Coach K" Krzyzewski, or take classes in the art of magic from famed magicians Penn & Teller.

These and other slickly produced courses can be streamed from MasterClass' library of more than 180 titles, covering arts and entertainment, business, design and style and other fields.

The annual bill, a flat fee for as many classes as you want to take, ranges from $180 to $276 — $15 to $23 a month, depending on the number of devices that have access. Each class comes with a downloadable PDF guide. MasterClass has no free trial.

Wondrium. Instructors on this subscription-based streaming site are experts in their fields, even if most don't carry the name recognition of the MasterClass celebrities. Courses of potential interest include America's Musical Heritage, taught in conjunction with the Smithsonian; How to Play Chess: Lessons from an International Master; In the Footsteps of Vincent van Gogh; Screenwriting 101; and How to Stay Fit As You Age.

The site, formerly called The Great Courses, costs $150 when billed annually, $12.50 a month. It has a 14-day free trial.

"We've always had a deep basis of what I call liberal arts-based education led by university professors, but with this idea that it's not for credit," says Cale Pritchett, chief marketing officer. "We're really creating content for just the pure joy of lifelong learning."

Courses to advance your career

Coursera. You can take certain classes for free and get recommendations based on your background and career goals. The company partners with more than 300 universities, including Duke, the University of Michigan and Yale.

Recent Coursera classes popular with people 50 and older include Foundations of Digital Marketing and E-commerce from Google; What is the Metaverse? from Facebook parent Meta; and The Science of Well-Being from Yale.

A Coursera Plus plan that gives access to more than 7,000 courses costs $399 a year. Pursuing a graduate-level university certificate or more advanced degrees can take months, even years, and cost well into the thousands of dollars.

LinkedIn Learning. The education arm of LinkedIn offers hundreds of free classes, but you'll have to subscribe or be a LinkedIn Premium member to tap into any of its 20,000 courses, some bite-size, some longer.

Given the profile of the Microsoft-owned social media network, most classes lean heavily on professional content and career growth, whether you're learning project management or taking a class to speak more confidently and effectively. LinkedIn says it rolls out thousands of new courses every week.

Stand-alone subscriptions to LinkedIn Learning Premium and LinkedIn Premium Career start at $239.88 when billed annually. Month-to-month billing starts at $39.99. You start with a one-month free trial.

Udemy and **Udacity** are among other sites that offer mainly fee- or subscription-based business and technology classes

How you can find classes

Think about the subjects you're interested in, and head online to do your research. If you're job hunting, consider what skills and positions are in demand, and given your background, what you might realistically take on.

"You could start at pretty basic levels," Hollands says. "There's so much out there that you can teach yourself. … If you were doing heavy machine operating, it doesn't mean to say you couldn't become a programmer."

Ask friends, current or former colleagues and people you [know on social media](#) for class recommendations. Look at class and instructor ratings and don't necessarily go for the first thing you become aware of, Bonk says. Try a class if possible. Most classes at Coursera, as an example, are free to audit.

Class Central has a searchable database of courses and tracks trends in the online educational landscape. You can filter searches on Class Central by such criteria as level, duration, cost and whether the course offers a certificate upon completion.

Also search MOOC.org and MOOC List to find potential courses of interest.

Value the knowledge, don't pad the résumé

Not all older adults need to list online classes [on their résumés](#), especially if learning for fun.

Employers don't value online classes as much as four-year degrees, Hollands says. But workers need to acquire new skills fairly frequently and don't have time to return for an advanced degree.

"If you can show you started one [online course] and you finished, that by itself tells the employer something about you, regardless of whether it's learning how to play the guitar, cooking soufflé or learning how to analyze big data," she says.

Coursera offers a free course called Learning How to Learn, which teaches mental tools to master tough subjects.

"Many people haven't taken courses for a long time," says Betty Vandenbosch, Coursera senior adviser. "It might help them to be reminded that they can and should continue learning throughout their lives."

Writer Laura Petrecca contributed to this story.

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