

Creative Learning Pays Off for Web Start-Ups



SEATTLE — Anyone who wants to learn calculus, statistics or ancient Greek history can take free online courses in those subjects at a variety of sites from instructors with distinguished academic pedigrees. For more mundane pursuits, like learning how to paddleboard or build a planter box for the garden, there is an inexhaustible supply of free how-to videos on YouTube, eHow and other sites.

But if you'd like to watch a recording of a three-day course on the minutiae of photographing clients who commission high-end portraits of

themselves in lingerie, that will cost \$149 on a Web site called [CreativeLive](#).

While companies like [Udacity](#) and [Coursera](#) — providers of giant online open courses — are just beginning to introduce courses with fees that count for academic credit, other online learning companies have carved out a lucrative niche in courses on design, photography and other creative pursuits. CreativeLive, [Lynda.com](#) and others have tapped into an audience of customers who are highly motivated to hone skills that might help enhance their careers. The online courses are usually less expensive than intensive in-person workshops on photography and other subjects, and can attract top-notch instructors with their promise of big national audiences.

Amanda Picone, a wedding photographer in Babylon, N.Y., bought the CreativeLive course on photographing people in lingerie, a genre known as boudoir photography, because she thought it would enhance her appeal to clients, some of whom want boudoir shots. Ms. Picone learned that asking subjects to lift their chins slightly while posing can result in more flattering portraits.

“They’ve all been incredibly helpful,” Ms. Picone said of the several CreativeLive courses she has bought.

Investors are noticing the profit potential in this niche of online learning. In January, some of the venture capital firms behind Facebook and other technology companies pumped \$103 million into [Lynda.com](#), a maker of online training videos for software and other technical tools used by creative professionals.

And two of Hollywood's largest talent agencies, Creative Artists Agency and William Morris Endeavor, have invested small sums in CreativeLive that signal their interest in using the company's service as a new outlet for their celebrity clients. CreativeLive has raised a total of \$8 million since last year, most of it from the venture firm Greylock Partners.

While it is unlikely that Tom Cruise and other matinee idols will begin teaching on CreativeLive soon, Creative Artists Agency represents home décor experts, chefs and authors, many of whom already earn speaker fees for appearing at trade shows and corporate events.

"We love the idea that this could grow into another platform of scale and financial weight and could be another piece of the offering to our clients," said Michael Yanover, the head of business development at Creative Artists.

CreativeLive has a twist that most of its rivals do not: courses are broadcast live over the Internet and shaped in real time by input from a small studio audience and the much larger group of people watching online. About 20,000 to 60,000 people on average tune in for the live broadcasts. One exception was the audience for a three-day course by the author Ramit Sethi called "Essentials for Creative Entrepreneurs," which topped 150,000.

In some cases, instructors earn six-figure payments for teaching multi-day courses. In total, CreativeLive has "paid out millions" to its instructors, said Chase Jarvis, a commercial photographer who co-founded the company in 2010.

“Creativity is the new literacy,” Mr. Jarvis said.

The company’s live broadcasts are free, but CreativeLive charges \$19 to \$249 for replays of the courses; 3 to 10 percent of its live audience ends up buying the replays because they weren’t able to tune into the entire course live or want to study it more closely.

“They see it as furthering their career or life,” said Mika Salmi, a long-time Internet and media executive who used to run Viacom’s digital operations and joined CreativeLive as chief executive last year. “This is an investment in me.”

[KelbyTraining.com](#), a photography education site, has about 100,000 subscribers who pay \$25 a month, or \$199 a year, for full access to video courses on topics as varied as photographing wildlife or corporate head shots.

[Digital-Tutors](#) has more than 1,000 courses on the special effects and graphics tools used by filmmakers and game developers, available to subscribers who pay \$45 a month. Coursera, too, has begun to beef up its arts and design offerings, including a course titled “Introduction to Programming for Digital Artists” taught by an instructor from the California Institute for the Arts.

[Lynda.com](#) is one of the largest sites in the category. Co-founded 17 years ago by Lynda Weinman, who worked on special effects in “Return of the Jedi” and “Tron,” the company had revenue of more than \$100 million last year, up 30 percent from a year earlier. Like CreativeLive, [Lynda.com](#) says it has been profitable since its earliest days.

The company charges individual customers \$25 a month for unlimited access to a library of 90,000 training videos, many of them on programs used by artists, designers and editors — what Ms. Weinman calls “the creative side of software.”

“I don’t feel any resistance to charging for it,” Ms. Weinman said in a phone interview. It isn’t clear yet how such sites will influence the more traditional sources of education in creative fields, including art schools, community colleges and weekend photography seminars. Ms. Weinman said that schools “initially felt very threatened” by [Lynda.com](#), but many of them, including Columbia College Chicago, have now paid for licenses to the site so their students and faculty can watch its videos.

John Upchurch, director of computer and technology resources for Columbia College Chicago’s art and design department, said the videos gave instructors time to teach more than just how to use software tools. “A lot of people want to get more toward creative thinking, critical thinking kinds of things,” Mr. Upchurch said.

CreativeLive brings more of an entertainment sensibility to its courses than rivals, blending the banter of a daytime talk show with the instructional content of a classroom. It operates out of a loftlike space in Seattle with multiple studios, each outfitted with four to seven video cameras, including one on a crane, for mimicking the slick production qualities of television.

The company is constructing another broadcasting studio in San Francisco, and has plans for studios in New York and London to cater more to live audiences in other time zones, Mr. Salmi said.

During the broadcast of the recent course on boudoir photography, the class instructor, Jennifer Rozenbaum, was perched on a stool in front of an audience of six women, all interested in developing their own boudoir photography businesses. Two other people fielded questions for Ms. Rozenbaum from audience members on the Internet.

With a bed in a corner of the studio for later demonstrations on posing clients and shooting techniques, Ms. Rozenbaum offered tips on how to price boudoir photography services, make subjects comfortable while they're posing in their lingerie and recruit new clients. One member of the live audience chimed in that her clients were often referrals from her husband, a personal trainer who works with women eager to immortalize their newly fit bodies on film.

Many instructors in traditional photography classes require their students to sign noncompete agreements that prevent them from offering their services within a designated area of the instructor's home base.

In a phone interview after her CreativeLive course, Ms. Rozenbaum, who runs her own boudoir photography business in Long Island City, Queens, said she was not worried that she might be training her own competition.

"I would be lying if I said it never enters my mind, but at the end of the day, no one can be me," she said.