

# Online learning: how to acquire new skills during lockdown

[David Robson](#) Sun 19 Apr 2020 09.00 BST

Millions of users are signing up for free courses taught by professors from Harvard and other top universities



Deep concentration of study is more rewarding than scrolling through social media. Photograph: Fizkes/Getty Images

For many of us in self-isolation, it can feel like the coronavirus has put the world on hold as we wait for release from our temporary imprisonment. But increasing numbers of people are using the time to build their skillset, with an upsurge in enrolments on online learning platforms such as edX, FutureLearn and Coursera, which offer “massive open online courses” – or Moocs.

Coursera, for instance, has seen an eightfold increase in enrolments for social science, personal development, arts and humanities courses since the start of the coronavirus outbreak. “It’s unprecedented,” says the

company's chief product officer, Shravan Goli. (In late March, its [Science of Well Being](#) course saw 500,000 new enrolments in a single weekend.)

Devoting some of our quarantine time to self-education makes sense. Besides helping to bolster your career during this economic uncertainty, learning a new skill can give you a sense of control that will help cope with anxiety engendered by the epidemic.

As [James Wallman](#) says in his book *Time and How to Spend It*, personal growth is central to many psychological theories of long-term happiness. So although an hour listening to a lecture may not be as enticing as the instant gratification of reality TV or social media, it will lead to greater life-satisfaction in the long term. "You could say that humans are like bicycles: if you're not heading towards something you fall over," Wallman says. And when we are social distancing, online courses are one of the best ways to do that.

## What do the courses involve?

The specifics vary from platform to platform, though many follow the same basic model. With the larger platforms such as edX, Coursera, and FutureLearn, you can choose university-affiliated courses – so you know you are being taught by experts in the field. The courses are of varying lengths – from a few hours to a regular, weekly commitment over several months – and typically involve video lectures, reading texts and regular tests to check your memory and understanding of the syllabus.

In many cases enrolment is free, but may have to pay to get a certificate verifying that you have completed the course.

## What should I look for in a course?

You might be tempted to sign up to the courses with the most prestigious instructors, but that would be a mistake, says James Murphy, who used Moocs to prepare a master's degree while he was housebound with an illness. "Institutional affiliations aren't always a good guide to quality," he says.

Many of the platforms offer user reviews where you can gauge other learners' enjoyment and satisfaction with the course, but nothing beats trying it for yourself, says Murphy, who is now an associate lecturer at the Open University. "I think the best advice is to sign up and see if you like it – there's no reason to stick with one you dislike if the delivery isn't engaging. You can usually tell in the first hour if you'll enjoy the course or not."

If you are hoping for professional development and considering the cost of the certificate, you might want to check whether employers recognise the qualification. Coursera's Goli points out that about 30 companies now accept the [Google-affiliated course on IT management](#), for instance. The reviews can guide you on this, as can the course descriptions, which sometimes include statistics from student surveys about the professional benefits that came from the experience.

It's also important to pick a course of the right difficulty – something just beyond your comfort-zone – engaging enough to occupy your mind, but not so ambitious that it's frustrating. That way, you'll achieve the "flow state". "You'll lose track of time," says Wallman – and the deep concentration will feel much more rewarding than simply scrolling through social media.

## How can I stay motivated?

Even if you have chosen a course that is perfectly suited to your goals, you may find your initial enthusiasm evaporates and your discipline trails off.

“Lack of routine and time is often the biggest hurdle,” says writer and regular Mooc user Bianca Barratt. Her advice is to try to set up a schedule and “treat it like a physical class you’ve signed up for. Show up when you say you will, make an effort with the class exercises and homework and complete the course in full.”

Another good strategy, according to Anant Agarwal, the founder and CEO of edX, is to find a “study buddy or form a bigger learning group, so that they can motivate each other and enjoy the course together”. You might make a pact with people you already know, or you could connect with people from the discussion forums that accompany the course. Like your classmates at a traditional school or university, you can help each other to understand the difficult material, and the feeling of accountability might spur you on when you find distractions drawing you away from your goal.

## **What do I do after completing the course?**

For some, this may be just the start of the journey – furnishing you with a greater confidence to learn and the motivation to take it further. If you find that you’re hooked, many of the platforms also provide accredited bachelors and master’s degrees from selected universities, though this will be more expensive.

For others, the completion of a single course will be enough. But whatever your goals, the quest to learn a new skill or discipline may be the perfect distraction from the frustrations of self-isolation – allowing you to connect with new people and transforming this period into a time of enlightenment and self-discovery.

## **The next step – seven Moocs to expand your mind**

## [Learning How to Learn](#)

*McMaster University, University of California San Diego, via Coursera*

With more than 2 million enrolments, this short course is a natural place to start your journey, offering the mental tools for you to master any new subject.

## [From the Big Bang to Dark Energy](#)

*University of Tokyo, via Coursera*

Physicist Hitoshi Murayama examines the biggest question of all – the origins of the universe.

## [Rhetoric: The Art of Persuasive Writing and Public Speaking](#)

*Harvard University, via edX*

Professor James Engell will help you to polish your communication skills in this eight-week course.

## [Science and Cooking](#)

*Harvard University, via edX*

Physicists, chemists and restaurant chefs explore the transformation of food in the kitchen.

## [An Introduction to Screenwriting](#)

*University of East Anglia, via FutureLearn*

If your mind is fizzing with inspiration for a Netflix mini-series, this course – from UEA's prestigious creative writing programme – will help you translate it to the screen.

## [Introduction to Mathematical Thinking](#)

*Stanford University, via Coursera*

Not for the fainthearted but more than 200,000 learners have taken this journey through the basics of mathematical logic and proof.

## **Buddhism and Modern Psychology**

*Princeton University, via Coursera*

Bestselling author Robert Wright examines what modern psychology can learn from ancient teachings.