

This site I like

Coursera: when learning never ends

www.coursera.org

When I first looked at the Coursera website I felt a sort of excitement, the intellectual equivalent of end-of-season discount sales in your favorite shoe shop. 1,026 courses, from more than 100 universities worldwide, completely free. And some have such inviting titles, such as “Effective Altruism” or “How to Change the World”!

Coursera, launched in 2012, is currently the largest MOOC provider. MOOC, meaning massive open online course, represents a recent development in distance education. The acronym refers to online courses aimed at unlimited participation and provided in open access. Coursera’s courses are open in two different senses: they have no admission requirements, such as specific graduation, so anyone with internet access can get started, and they are free.

Subject areas range from technology to the arts, from medicine to economics, finance, health and food, design, mathematics, and data analysis. The majority of the courses are on university-level subject matter from a university faculty. While some of the courses are always accessible, allowing you to start and finish when you like and to work at your own pace, others have a beginning and an end date and are accessible only during that time.

Every course is divided into sections, and every section includes short video lectures, readings and interactive quizzes that have to be completed to obtain the final certificate. Occasionally, students have deadlines for assignments. Most of the courses also provide interactive user forums to support community interactions between fellow learners and instructors.

Many of the courses could attract editors. Among those directly related to editors’ everyday work, “Writing in the Sciences”, from Stanford University, aims to teach scientists to become more effective, efficient, and confident writers. Using practical examples and exercises, this course illustrates the principles of good writing and tricks for writing faster and with less anxiety. It also illustrates the format of a scientific manuscript, and describes some issues in publication, such as plagiarism, authorship, ghostwriting, reproducible research and peer review.

Another course of interest to non-native English editors is “Crafting an Effective Writer: Tools of the Trade”. The course teaches the student how to become an effective builder of sentences using the basic tools of English grammar, punctuation, and writing.

For those interested in a better understanding of research articles, “Design and Interpretation of Clinical Trials”, in partnership with Johns Hopkins University, could be a useful starting point to learn the basic principles of the design of randomized clinical trials and how they should be reported for publication in a medical journal. “Statistical Reasoning for Public Health” might be an interesting introduction to some of the most commonly used methods of basic statistics.

There are many other titles to fascinate the curious editor: what about “Guinea Pigs, Heroes & Desperate Patients: The History & Ethics of Human Research” or “What a Plant Knows”? Almost every week new courses are added, so periodic checks can help to discover new, interesting topics.

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