*Coursera Offers University Courses to Everyone For Free*

Have you ever wanted to go back to school to learn something new? That would be great, but the truth is school is a time and cost commitment and we’re all busy with work and other responsibilities. Online course offerings through universities are nothing new, but what if universities offered courses for free at anytime and to anyone who wanted to take them? Coursera, a Silicon Valley startup that just launched in public beta in April 2012, is doing just that.

*Who Is Coursera and What Makes It Unique*

A concept developed by two Stanford University Computer Science professors and funded by venture capitalists, Coursera has partnered with over 30 universities (Stanford, Duke University, Vanderbilt, etc.) to offer free courses in the Humanities, Medicine, Biology, Social Sciences, Mathematics, Business, Computer Science, and many other areas.

The two professors conducted studies showing that online learning is just as effective (if not more) than classroom based instruction. What makes Coursera’s offerings so enticing to students? It is, most likely, the ability for students to work at their own pace. Content is presented through video, retrieval questions, interactive exercises, and peer assessment. So the professors found, consequently, that attendance for courses increased 20% and test scores improved from 41% to 74%.

Of course, the downside here is that the courses do have the traditional university requirements. The courses run anywhere from six to ten weeks. There are also assignments that should be completed. Other than that, there are rarely prerequisites, no courses to regularly attend, and no textbooks to buy. Additionally, Coursera states, in most cases, their courses cannot be used for college credit.

*Easy Sign-up and Interface*

To get started with Coursera is very easy. All that is required is an email address and password. A user has the option of creating a profile but it isn’t necessary. After that, a user can browse general course listings or search based on a specific subject area, such as Computer Science.

Click on an offering and a user can get the following: a statement of when the course starts, length in weeks, and work load in hours per week required, then information about the course, the instructors teaching it, recommended background, course format, and a FAQ.

*Is There A Future In Offering College/ University Content Online?*

Based on the numbers Coursera has listed on its web site, the answer is yes. So far, 1,080,000 students from 196 countries have enrolled in at least one course. In effect, the company is creating an international student community for adult education. How long Coursera will offer free courses is unknown. It is clear, though, that the interest in college courses offered online appeals to a wide segment of the population, so it will be interesting to see what other companies will follow Coursera’s trailblazing path.