Selecting a Learning Platform

How to find the right platform for taking your education and training content online
By Jeff Cobb

The opportunities for taking content online to reach more people and create new revenue has never been bigger, but figuring out the right platform to use can be confusing and frustrating. Most subject matter entrepreneurs will want to be sure to find a platform that provides an attractive, user-friendly experience, e-commerce capabilities, and support for major types of content like video or Webinars. These days, the ability to support mobile delivery is also essential.

Beyond that baseline, it pays to ask the following questions to help narrow the field and find the platform that will really work best for you.

1. How much control will I have?
Your platform will be an online extension of you and your business, so it pays to understand how much control you will have over it. There are two key areas of control to consider.

The first is how brandable it is and, in general, how much can be modified about the end user experience. Can you change all of the key branding elements: logo, colors, fonts? Are you able to change the navigation or how text and graphics are positioned on the page?

The second is *who* has the ability to make these changes. Do you have to rely on the vendor, or are these things that you or someone you designate can change as needed?

Platforms vary pretty widely in the level of control they give you, so if being able to make these kinds of changes is important to you, make sure to get vendors to show you what is or is not possible.

2. Do I want it to help me "make the market?"
Some platform vendors, like Udemy (www.udemy.com), are creating major marketplaces for training as part of their overall value proposition. This approach has upsides and downsides.

The upside, of course, is that these companies have already invested and continue to invest in building a large audience of buyers for online educational content. You get instant access to that audience, usually along with a number of features for helping you to promote and sell your content as easily as possible. So far, so good.

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Keep in mind, though, that these companies take a percentage of your sales – sometimes as much as 50 percent. That may be okay, if they are helping you achieve what you could not otherwise achieve, but if you already have any sort of sizeable audience of your own, it can be a heavy price to pay.

Remember, too, that unless your content is truly unique, you may find yourself publishing into a market place that is already full of competitors, i.e., other experts who are making use of the same platform, and you will be inevitably be impacted by the pricing trends in that market. At Udemy, for example, average course pricing is between $29 and $99. Most experts can and should be charging more than that for high quality educational content, but that's hard to do in an environment where plenty of people with similar content are charging less.

3. What distribution options do I need?
If you just want to sell to individuals and really only need one channel for doing it, then just about any platform with e-commerce may be okay.

Often, however, the biggest opportunity is not in selling to individuals, but in selling to companies and organizations. If you want to pursue that opportunity, you probably will want a platform that makes it easy to set up group or company accounts, possibly even with their own custom login pages. Not every platform can do this.

If you want sell to companies that need to run your content on their own learning management system, or LMS, you may need an even more advanced option like SCORM Cloud (http://scorm.com/cloud) that enables you to distribute standards-compliant e-learning content to any LMS.

When it comes to distribution, it really pays to keep your options open, so be sure to get a good understanding of what's possible.

4. Is this about transactions or relationships?
An online platform should make it easy for a prospective customer to find and purchase your content. In many cases, that may be all you want – just an easy way to get the transaction done and send the customer on her merry way.

These days, though, it pays to be thinking about how you will maintain and grow relationships with your customers. After all, the easiest sale is always to an existing customer. So, be sure to understand what tools the platform provides for communicating with customers.

Does it give you ways to e-mail customers easily based on the content they have purchased? Can it automatically suggest new content based on content a customer has already purchased?

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How can it help you build a sense of community among you and your customers? Does it have tools like discussion boards? Can it connect into your major social media accounts?

If you want a platform with the potential for multiplying in value over time, thinking through how it will help you build relationships is critical.

5. What data is important to me and my customers?
Once you start selling and delivering content online, your customers will start generating data that can be of significant value both to you and to them.

Simply knowing, for example, whether learners complete a course or at what point they tend to abandon it can be very useful information for improving your products. Having clear information about what is selling best can help drive new product ideas.

Individual learners like to see clearly how they are progressing in a course, including their scores on any assessments. And employers, of course, want to know how well their employees have performed.

That's just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the types of data can be generated in an online platform. Be sure to think through the types of data that would be valuable to you and your customers and make sure any platform you consider can capture that data and provide you with access to it through easy-to-use reporting tools.

6. Does it play well with others?
Platforms rarely operate in isolation these days. Even if you don't connect it to anything else initially, there is a good chance you will eventually want your online content platform to integrate with other systems you use.

This might include, for example, integration with whatever e-mail system you use (e.g., Constant Contact, Mail Chimp, Aweber). Or, with a membership or customer relationship management (CRM) system. Or, as mentioned above, with the social networks you use.

Be sure to understand whether a platform has ever been integrated before with the systems you care about. Also make sure you understand how that integration was achieved. Was it as easy as flipping a switch – i.e., "plug and play" – or did it require extensive programming? Answers to questions like these can save you a lot of headaches down the road.

7. How much support do I need?
Finally, be as objective as possible in assessing how much support you may need in using a platform successfully.

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Will you need help creating the content? Getting it set up in the system? How will you provide support for your customers when they have issues? Do they have an established based of users who provide help to each other (e.g., through discussion forums)?

Platform companies vary widely in the types of support they can provide and how good they are at whatever support they do provide. Be sure to ask for references, and if possible, find additional references to talk to beyond whoever the platform company provides (through asking colleagues, searching on the Web, etc.).

Naturally, when asking references about support, also ask about the other areas outlined here. With solid information on these seven areas, you will be well on your way to picking the right platform and launching your online course empire.

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