

On Learning Cohorts

A bird's eye view of effective Cohort-Based Courses today



A baseline summary

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MOOCs <> Cohort-Based Courses

Massively Open Online Courses

- ❑ **Definition:** Free/low-cost easily accessible online courses
- ❑ **Learning approach:** Asynchronous
- ❑ **Timing:** Self-paced, On-demand,
- ❑ **Ideal Topics:** Evergreen Knowledge
- ❑ **Student interaction:** Transfer Solo
- ❑ **Cost:** \$10-50, up to \$250 on average
- ❑ **Modality:** Passive content consumption

Cohort-Based Courses

- ❑ **Definition:** Interactive courses taken by a group of learners or students who advance through the course together, often with community and active learning at the core
- ❑ **Learning approach:** Live and Asynchronous
- ❑ **Timing:** Time bound with set start and end dates
- ❑ **Ideal Topics:** Skills building, topics that benefit from feedback and practice
- ❑ **Student interaction:** Community
- ❑ **Cost:** \$500-5,000
- ❑ **Modality:** Active learning

Spotlight: CBCs

CBCs focus on active, hands-on learning

- Instead of watching a course about sales strategy, learners have to actually make the sale and report back to their peers.
- Instead of watching videos about color theory in graphic design, learners design a flyer and critique each other's work.
- Instead of watching videos about how bonsai trees grow, learners actually grow their own bonsai.

Study

A 2019 **Harvard study**, for example, found that students in an introductory physics class scored higher on tests following active learning sessions. Students have to put in more effort through this format; they'll stumble and make mistakes. While this is inarguably harder than listening to a charismatic "sage on stage" lecturer, the research showed students actually learned more from the hands-on experience.

Live, bi-directional learning leads to more accountability

- The forced scarcity of fixed start and end dates adds a sense of urgency and focus. Also offer live lectures with instructors, active participation in conversations, applied learning exercises, and breakout groups.
- Cohort-based courses can have more accountability in that they are bi-directional, as opposed to one-way, meaning there's an exchange of knowledge between the instructor and learners, as well as learners with fellow learners. It's a dialogue, not a static lecture.
- Cohort-based courses incentivize instructors to make their material more actionable for learners leading to higher-quality educational experiences.

Book

In his book **Cooperative Learning**, the clinical psychologist and professor of psychology Spencer Kagan argues that the single most powerful approach to comprehension and retention is interactive processing, which occurs when “students engage in interaction with partners or teammates over the content.”

Community building improves learning outcomes through social features

- Cohort-based courses center around a small to midsize community of peers, often **100 or so learners per cohort**. This group of people sharing the experience challenges learners, motivates them, and leads to an **overall emphasis on community and the learner experience**.
- MIT Teaching & Learning Laboratory, [Dr. Lori Breslow](#), [found](#) that edX learners who collaborated with a fellow student in completing course material scored nearly 3 points higher, on average, than those working solo.

Interleaving Learning

Studies also show that what psychologists and neuroscientists call “interleaving” learning – where instructors mix different topics, ideas, and activities together during study, forcing learners to intentionally switch between them rather than focusing on a single subject – can result in better learning outcomes for learners.

The Cyclist Analogy

Norman Triplett, who published what many consider one of the early experiments in social psychology, found that cyclists performed better when around others, concluding that even the “bodily presence of another contestant participating simultaneously in the race serves to liberate latent energy not ordinarily available.” (Triplett completed his study 100 years ago; we can see the evidence in the popularity of Peloton’s social-exercise model today.)

Conclusion

Cohort-based courses could fulfill the promise of learning and enablement, particularly as learners continue to support each other after they complete their course tracks — and as the cohort forms a tight, internet-native alumni network.