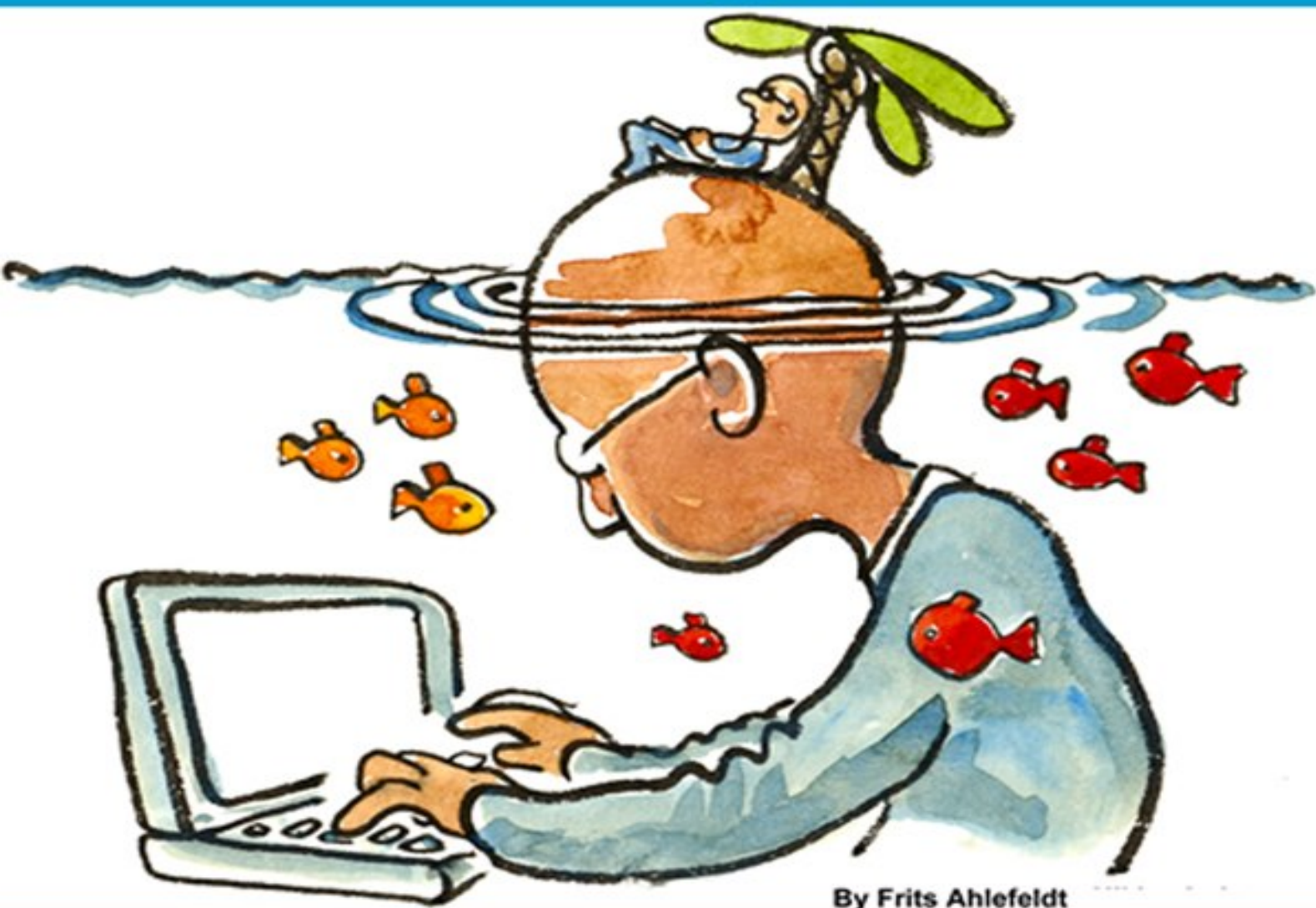


# How to Teach Online without Selling Your Soul!

*Build Your Own e-Learning Business,  
Create Unique Content and  
Work from Anywhere*



By Frits Ahlefeldt

4th revised & annotated edition, André Klein 2012

# **How to Teach Online without Selling *Your Soul*: Build Your Own e-Learning Business, Create Unique Content and Work from Anywhere**

4th revised and annotated edition  
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# Reviews & Praise

“The most important thing about this book is that Andre unflinchingly spells out the simplicity of teaching online, and strips bare the misconceptions surrounding bells, whistles, toys and technology. After reading this, you will no longer feel overwhelmed about teaching online, and you’ll avoid the many pitfalls of teachers like myself who dived into the online world without Andre as a guide.” – *Sylvia Guinan, online teacher and edupreneur*

“The best book on How to build an online teaching business that I did not write.” – *Kirsten Winkler, edupreneur*

“A shortcut to your overwhelming expedition to the get-the-knowhow-to-start-teaching-online world. Extremely interesting and easy reading articles. Great tips and sound advice that helped me feel less threatened by the challenge of this new journey!” – *María Inés Brumana Espinosa, teacher and author*

# Foreword

A lot has changed since the days I started teaching languages on the Internet back in early 2008. Teaching platforms and marketplaces have come and gone (mostly gone) but one thing remained the same. Teachers who invested time and effort in building their own personal brands were usually the successful ones who back then and they still are today.

I called this group of teachers, tutors and coaches “edupreneurs”, a mix between educator and entrepreneur. The key to their success, besides being really great teachers, is their knowledge and understanding of the business side of teaching online. And if you are trying to make a living from teaching on the Internet, the business aspects will take a lot of your time, trust me.

Especially, in the early phase of a new market it is crucial to not attach one’s fate to a platform or service that might be gone tomorrow. And though I have been covering online education for almost four years now, the market is still in its infancy.

When I argued with fellow online teachers about that fact back in 2008 most of them did not believe me, of course. Everything was new, the platforms they worked on had decent funding and we all were in the same boat, right? The founders wanted to help teachers make money and did everything to get students book their lessons. Well, a bit down the road things look differently today and instead of investing time and effort into someone else’s startup most of those online teachers would have been better off taking care of their own business.

Now, I know that this way is not for everyone, probably not for most teachers who want to teach on the Internet and earn some revenue doing so. Besides being really dedicated to the teaching part of the business you also need to have the stomach to get yourself through hard times when no one books your lessons. You also need to get your hands dirty, jump in the trenches of social media and engage with your potential audience. And last but not least, you need to learn the basics of web development, video and audio editing, web publishing etc, hence you need to learn how to build your home in a world of refugee camps as André put it in one of his blog posts.

Talking about André. When he provided me with the first edition of this ebook about a year ago, I immediately told him that it was the book I had always wanted to write. Unfortunately, I don’t have the time to sit down and to create a comprehensive guide that could get you from the beginning of an online teaching career to the point where all is set up and ready to go. Well, André just did that.

Of course, it is not a detailed step by step guide that will take you through every little detail, I think that is close to impossible taking the ever changing landscape of the Internet and its new possibilities into consideration. What this book will do though is to give the reader a great overview about the general steps to consider when setting up your online teaching business for the long run. It is much more about the mindset required as the rest can be learned along the way. There is no one fits all formula, anyway. Each of you needs to

find his / her own mix of tools depending on your personal goals and subjects you want to teach.

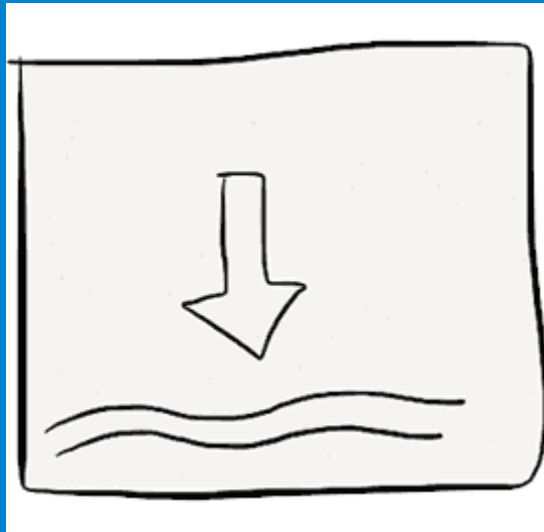
André always underlines the importance of independence when you set your sails to this journey. Independence means of course freedom to do whatever you like, something that is not given when you sign up for an online teaching platform in most cases. But independence also means that you need to take care of all the rest. But fear not, you are not on your own.

There is a growing group of educators out there just like you and there are many ways to connect with them. So go ahead, jump into the cold water, follow the advice in this book and join the growing club of edupreneurs.

Kirsten Winkler

June 2012

# I. Preparing Ground



## Introduction

When I first thought about online learning I was working in a private school teaching languages to teenagers with attention deficits and a general disinterest in school. While getting them to focus on reading and writing sometimes seemed an arduous task, they nevertheless showed a continuous fascination with video games and everything online. Getting them interested in technology mostly wasn't a problem. Getting them interested in something *else* was!

So I asked myself: what if we could meet somewhere else, a place they are already familiar with, where they feel comfortable: the Internet. I'd been working with computers for many many years but didn't have a clue how to go about it, or if it would work as well as I imagined. But I just somehow *felt* that it was possible. There had to be a way. So I set out on an online expedition to find out once and for all.

It was a journey full of expectations, false promises, success and failure, falling and getting up again, during which I met all kinds of amazing people from all over the planet and whose findings are documented in this book.

At first, the confusion was overwhelming. There was a creeping sense that I had jumped in too soon. Was I looking for a ghost?

But after a while of experimenting, it suddenly started to work so well (technologically, didactically and financially) that I had to quit my job at the "brick and mortar" institution called school and became a full-time online teacher.

I know it almost sounds too good to be true, but since then I have been moving freely between countries, taking my job with me wherever I go. No more commuting. No more board meetings. In fact, it finally felt like I could do whatever I want.

This little book is a compilation of articles which have appeared on my blog over the last two years, re-edited and annotated here to produce an immersive reading experience for both novices and seasoned "edupreneurs".

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## IMPORTANT NOTES:

1. This is not a dishwasher-manual. In other words, you will not find many technical explanations here. If you need to find out more about these things, Google is your friend. The reason for this limitation is that a) there's more than enough information about stuff like setting up a blog with contact forms and payment buttons, for example, already out there in the shape of tutorials, forums, etc. and b) they keep changing faster than I can update this book.

2. The fact that we're talking here about online teaching doesn't mean that there is some kind of magic push-button solution. Teaching is still about communication, first of all, and there is no technology or gadget in the world that can fully replace human interaction, not yet, at least. We're talking about general strategies here, not about programming web pages or "how to get rich quick".

3. Far from being a "guide for dummies", or a step-by-step manual that doesn't require any real work on your part, you nevertheless *will* find here **simple and practical instructions** to get you started making a living by teaching online. This book is based on the premise that once the right understanding is in place, it will get easier to take the right actions.

In short, the following writings aim at developing a deeper understanding of online learning, ditching the myths, deconstructing the hype and reclaiming a common-sense approach. You won't find any guarantees here of a "such and such figure income per year". And to be quite honest, I can't even guarantee you that you will like online teaching. A serious teacher committed to his work will inevitably find his very own unique route to success. There's no pre-packaged "success formula" - I might as well tell you right now. I'm simply sharing my excitement and experiences about online learning here to encourage you (yes, it's possible and it works great!) and hint at general strategies.

4. This book is not a pedagogical manual. It doesn't claim that one kind of didactic approach is better in *all* situations for all learners at all times, nor do I believe that such proclamations are of great value to anyone. Also, while I will talk about the changing role of education in the 21st century, I can't give any advice on

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how to conduct actual lessons because it depends too much on the individual context of students, teachers and topic.

5. Last but not least, I should point out that my background is in language learning but you can use any of the insights in this book for your particular subject, whether you are teaching Math or want to give guitar lessons.

Having said that, let's begin our journey.

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# 3 Reasons Why Guerrilla Education Is The Way Of The Future

From 2009 to 2010, there was a growth of one **million students** in online education in the US according to the [Sloan Consortium Report](#). It is the biggest growth measured so far and whereas traditional on-campus classes have been growing at only 2%, online education jumped ahead at a whopping 21% growth-rate.

First, people were afraid that this growth would vanish during the recession. So far the [numbers](#) show that exactly the opposite is the case: While overall business was going down, demand for online classes only increased (and is still increasing).

The reason for this is that online education is often far more *affordable* and convenient than in-class education, but more about that further down.

## Institutions vs Individuals

On the one hand we see a growing number of institutions like universities providing online courses. On the other hand more and more individuals are appearing: teachers and tutors are offering classes online, **working independently of location or institutions**, either part-time or as a full-time commitment. Those are what I call **Guerrilla Educators**:

- They don't belong to any highly hierarchical staff structure.
- They don't adhere to fixed curricula or styles of teaching
- They sit everywhere around the world: they are *globally informed*
- And they're challenging the very idea of what education is about!

## What are We Learning For?

In the factory-approach to education, the conveyor-belt mentality of learning, the raw product (a human being) goes into the education facility where it is processed and then leaves the factory as a finished product, ready for the market with standardized skill sets.

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This is just another way of saying: I'm going to school to get a degree to get a good job to get good money to get a good life. (One has to wonder whether that formula still applies in a world with increasing disparities between formal education and [job opportunities](#).)

Unfortunately, not everybody is the same and our education system often favors those most willingly conforming to the “factory standard”.

We could also say: there are temporary periods of learning for a target (degree, job, etc.) and then there's “lifelong learning”. The latter is not just somewhat *unfashionable*, it also seems devoid of any rewards and therefore often doesn't come with that same sense of urgency and importance as passing a formal test or course.

But is it really less important?

Sages of all times and places have claimed that lifelong learning is actually the key to a happy and fulfilled life: “Learning is not a product of schooling but the lifelong attempt to acquire it.” - Albert Einstein, or: “Live as if you were to die tomorrow. Learn as if you were to live forever.” - Mahatma Gandhi.

Lifelong learning refers to a variety of different modes and methods, inside and outside the classroom, about topics both mundane and abstract, indoors and outdoors, on your own and with a tutor. Simply speaking, it is more of a mindset than an action. One could also call it “holistic learning”, in the sense that learning is not something scattered or isolated but a fundamental lifestyle choice.

Professor John Field from the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (England & Wales) states that “**a lifelong learning system [...] takes well-being as its primary purpose**” and “is likely to differ significantly from present models.” ([source](#))

How could this be more different from the factory-approach? Suddenly our individual *well-being* is at stake: we're now looking at ourselves and our lives as open-ended processes, not products.

And it is through online education that this lifelong, holistic learning may experience a revival.

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## Guerrilla Education & Its Evolutionary Advantage

Traditional education is slow to adapt to a changing world that demands more and more education and continuous adaptation in the name of staying competitive. And while there *are* examples of universities offering courses online, they often don't fundamentally change the game but just transfer the same old rigid concepts from offline to online methodologies. Guerrilla education, however, is a lot more flexible:

1. The right private tutor can teach you *whatever you need* and *whenever you need it*
2. Courses aren't built around normative standards but around *individual requirements*
3. Private tutoring is the most *specialized* and *personalized* way of learning

A university degree may be an entry ticket to that dream job. But once we're in, new skills and knowledge will be demanded from us. Instead of sitting through classes and books after-hours, waiting for the pieces to come together, we can now go online and find a private tutor who will coach us step by step. And this is just the normative part. Ever wanted to learn the guitar, read Shakespeare or create quilts like a pro? There's not just "an app for that", there are actual people that we can talk to and learn from, just a click away.

When I first came up with the concept of the "Guerrilla Educator" I was slightly concerned that it would conjure up images of jungle warriors and torched buildings. And while I'm still not sure this is the best term, there's a transgressional element to it which is very apt. Working in governmental or private education entails a lot of politics, rules, regulations and enforcement. Even when teachers have the best of intentions, the way the system is built often makes it impossible to break through and try something new. The idea of the "Guerrilla Educator" however is not one of opposition: its subversion is not of the destructive kind; it's about seeing alternatives and grabbing them by the tail, not fighting the time-tested.

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## The 3 Most Common Myths

### 1. Online Teaching is *impersonal*

One of the most common responses I get when I tell people what I do (teaching & coaching online), is that they say they would miss the “real connection” to people around them. That this would not be for *them*, because *they need a personal connection to people!*

What do you think? **Can an online class be as personal as a class in a brick & mortar school?**

When I started doing this I had the same question. “Isn’t it a bit impersonal to teach *on air*?” My experience showed that the opposite is the case: teaching online can sometimes be far more personal than its offline variety. Here’s why:

- Psychological barriers (your “guard”) to communication aren’t that active when learning from the comfort of your home or familiar environment. People don’t feel exposed or uncomfortable in the same way they would while sitting in a classroom. This may encourage a very personal way of communicating and increase learning receptivity.
- The paradox: distance creates personal proximity.

Physical proximity of bodies around us may suggest a more personal atmosphere. But neither is it a guarantee (people might be sitting right next to you and are light years away, internally) nor does it mean that distance learning necessarily has to be cold and impersonal. And let’s be honest: How *personal* were our university lectures and lessons in school, really?

### 2. Online Teaching is *complicated*

When people think about online learning they sometimes imagine a person wired straight to a computer with endless cables and contraptions like some kind of cyborg. The assumption is that people without or only little IT-knowledge can’t learn and especially not teach online. It’s **only for computer specialists and**

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## major geeks, isn't it?

In recent years technology has developed far enough that it can make itself invisible. **The best technology is one that you don't even notice.** And we have these kinds of tools for online teaching, ready to use.

In a world of wireless networks and mobile Internet devices, online teaching is actually easier than ever! It's **not more complicated than making a phone call** but many times more powerful, transmitting not just audio but visual information, as well.

### 3. Online Teaching is *distracting*

This is linked to the second myth. Some people say that because the technology is so complicated or unnatural, a certain amount of our concentration is always locked up in dealing with it. In addition to that, our computing devices have multiple functions: we check emails, watch videos, book flights, chat and are constantly distracted ... how is online teaching supposed to fit in there? It can't possibly help us focus, or can it?

There is a certain truth in that. But it implies that students or teachers a) don't have any self-control and b) can't separate the different functions of their devices but feel compelled to use them **simultaneously instead of according to the task at hand.**

In other words, it is the responsibility of a teacher or student not to play Angry Birds or binge-check his emails during lessons. If someone chooses to distract himself, then either the lesson is boring or it's his own loss. But it happens offline, too.

Reading this article now I think I might have missed one of the more unspoken prejudices regarding online teaching: awkwardness. Talking to some people about live online teaching or coaching sessions, they shuddered at what to them would be an incredibly uncomfortable, even uncanny situation: communicating to a stranger many miles away. On a somewhat related note, I have to admit that after teaching

online now for a few years, I'm still no fan of webcams. And most of the students that I worked with by definition don't activate their video feeds in class, either. It may be a personal preference (some of my colleagues always use their webcam) but I find it very distracting to see a live feedback of my own face while trying to focus on a student. It's a bit like standing in class while holding a mirror up to your face. The most efficient use of webcams in online teaching I've witnessed with children, by the way. Younger students (age 7 or 8) generally choose the privacy of a deactivated webcam, but they aren't above employing it when there's an actual need, for example showing off a recent Christmas gift or drawing. It seems to me that they swim more naturally in these waters and instead of going for a default on or off, they use technology selectively. I try to follow this more balanced approach as much as I can. Since this way of teaching is still relatively young, the best advice I can give here, just like in the offline classroom, is to attune oneself to the learner, and adapt methods and technologies accordingly and individually.

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## Five Types of Online Learning

When you think back to your childhood days, chances are that your memories are very similar to those of many other people and look something like this: “Sitting in rows, facing a teacher and blackboard, we were pretending to pay attention, hunched over worksheets, surprise exams or (mostly boring) books until the bell rang.”

Although pedagogues and fresh school teachers are bristling with new and exciting “alternative” ideas, most of the time learning in school is **not much of a mystery**. We know the drill: written performance, presentations, appearance in class, grades, etc. Been there, done that.

Surprisingly, even the differences between a – let’s say 2nd grade in an average public school and a typical evening course for adults aren’t that large as one might expect. This is what we’ve come to know as “learning” – it’s what everybody does. So why challenge it?

Nevertheless, many people talk about a need for **reforms** concerning traditional modes of learning. Sir Ken Robinson even demands a completely new paradigm of education in order to shift from an enlightenment era industrialized **factory-style education** to something more subtle and based on the **needs of individuals**.

While all of these discussions are very beautiful, boasting with insights into cultural history and asking us to re-think the status-quo, it seems that **we are already swimming in a sea of alternatives!**

### 1. Independent Self-Study

It has become so common these days to do quick researches online with a few clicks that we may not be fully aware of the consequences this has for traditional education.

We don’t actually need to go to school or university merely to acquire *information*, anymore. Human beings have a lot of advantages compared to

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machines, but if it comes to mindlessly storing and retrieving facts (in detail) from vastly different fields, no human mind can compete with the endless information silos of the Net.

The same is true for libraries. Instead of books containing all the information available to us, books are now contained within a much larger spectrum of information. They are still important, yes. But they are by far not the only or always the best source of knowledge.

We are beginning to see a shift from a situation of scarcity to one of over-abundance. Put more bluntly: gaining access to knowledge is *not* the problem anymore. We still need to learn to interpret all of that data we find online, but there have never been better conditions for self-study in history!

## 2. Interactive Self-Study

Apart from learning on what day Columbus discovered America and how many stomachs a cow needs to do its daily round of digestion, another reason why we needed to spend so much time in schools was because of feedback. Vocabulary, for example, has to be repeated and repeated until it's *stored*. Traditionally, we were drilled by human beings, standing up in class and presenting multiplication tables or irregular verb conjugations: teacher saying yes, saying no, nodding, shaking her head.

A lot of this feedback is binary: it's *either or*. This, again, is a field where unfortunately the human brain does not excel as well as our digital assistants. In short: out-sourcing right/wrong feedback operations to interactive software frees up both time and mental capacity of the mentor to focus on what he does best, communicating directly.

Vocabulary trainers in and of themselves are nothing new. But if you plug this technology into the Net, it becomes even stronger. Whereas a person used to sit alone at home and drill vocabulary with a **lonely sheet of paper**, he can do this now within the context of an **online community**. Not only can he see how well his peers are doing, the statistical details of the feedback provided by machines can tell him exactly how many times he missed what exercise, etc. The first aspect can

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help in terms of **motivation**, the second in **identifying and targeting** the shortcomings.

Especially for children, a lot can be done here in terms of **reward systems**: mini-games can be unlocked, credits acquired which then can be used to purchase virtual goods within the community, and so on and so forth.

### 3. Context for Study Groups

We all remember the times when we needed to visit a friend's house on the other side of town because we had to do a presentation or lesson preparation together. Apart from the simple social satisfaction of **sitting around a table** and drinking coffee, there is no reason why we can't do this online - Not the drinking coffee! The studying, or pretending to study (while discussing yesterday's party). Especially if study groups have to meet frequently, if there are many questions (or if there's just too much "news" to share) it doesn't always make sense to be there "**in the flesh**".

One has to note that a big part of why study groups work is the social aspect: the **comfort** of being in the same boat, of **supporting one another** actively and passively by correcting and explaining, asking questions, etc. **No computer can replace that.** But we can use computers to facilitate this analog human connection.

### 4. Extension of the Classroom

Imagine you can see your teacher and his whiteboard while he is hundreds of miles away. Imagine you click a button to "raise your hand" and your teacher calls on you, you get "permission to speak" and you ask a question. Imagine there are 10-20 other students just like you, whispering to each other via the integrated chat-room.

Every day, thousands of students are already learning in this manner. This is what is often called the "Virtual Classroom" approach. The underlying concept is to **re-create the conditions of a real classroom**. While that may or may not always be a good idea (3D simulations of actual classrooms have proven to be simply too complicated and distracting) – it works, somehow.

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Your classroom could contain people from 10 different timezones. Some of them might have to be true night owls and morning larks to attend. But the **possibilities for collaboration and exchange on a global scale** in terms of culture & language are simply mind-blowing.

Again, here we have a computer facilitating human connections: **instead of a human being “speaking” to or interacting with a machine, we have machines enabling people to speak to each other.**

If there are technical problems, this can be very irritating, especially when dealing with large groups: it ranges from choppy audio/video to lack of synchronization between the participants to microphone noises like feedback and distortion, etc.

In the future, when broadband speeds will accelerate even in developing countries and overall connectivity will improve, this might be less of a problem, but we all know Murphy’s law which states: “Anything that can go wrong will go wrong”.

## 5. Private Coaching or Tutoring Sessions

This is basically the same as learning in a virtual classroom, only minus the gadgets, presentation-style broadcast approach and classmates. It’s the **minimalist** approach. More about this further down. The obvious benefit here is that since the setup is a lot less complex, the likelihood of having to deal with technical issues is far smaller. The ideal case is that you have two people talking with each other. Instead of one sender and many receivers as is often the case in the classroom scenario, here we have two people who ideally **connect on an equal basis**. And while one person plays the **role of teacher** or guide and the other the **role of student**, this is also a perfect model for doing language exchanges, in which both parties switch roles, depending on the target of the current session.

Also, this particular kind of online learning via private coaching or tutoring sessions is one of the most convenient ways for freelance teachers to make a living online.

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This piece, despite its somewhat sketchy nature, is an important one. My aim was to broadly summarize very different fields and approaches that are often lumped together when people speak about e-learning or online learning. This diffusion is a somewhat unfortunate circumstance which has already killed the term e-learning (or at least made it less frequent). It seems that simply characterizing something as “electronic” loses its significance when everything is electronic. The same applies to the word “online”. We take it for granted nowadays that things are online. So, when both “online” and “electronic” fail to characterize these new modes of learning, we have to be very careful and specific. Fact-checking historical data on Wikipedia or learning Chinese in a virtual classroom are both happening online, but they are very different approaches to learning! The mere fact that learning happens online seems to have less and less innate meaning.

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# II. How To Teach Online



## Where to begin?

As I've said before, when I started thinking about online teaching I was virtually clueless, I only had this deep gut-feeling that it must be possible.

The first thing that I did was googling something like “teach online”. I quickly found a variety of so-called **teaching platforms** where you can sign up, create a profile and hold private sessions or conduct lessons in a virtual classroom.

So, what did I do? I signed up here and there, saw sites that demanded a payment up-front just for the listing, moved on – and waited.

And waited...

And waited...

While I was waiting, I tried to figure out how these platforms work. I had been building webpages myself for more than a decade, so I always thought to have a solid grasp of how a site is supposed to work, but on some of these sites **it took me hours** just to figure out how to correctly fill out my profile, not to mention **create or edit actual courses!**

Eventually, some students came and requested lessons. Most of them scheduled something and then **didn't show up**. But once in a blue moon, learning actually did happen – I met real people! (after painstakingly explaining the students how to use the “classroom” software). Unfortunately this was not the norm. **Most of the energy and time was lost on friction** with clumsily programmed interfaces.

To make a long story short, eventually I gave up on these platforms. The reason why they didn't work (for me, at least) are many, but as one of my colleagues, Charles R. Perry [argued](#) once, **online teaching start-ups might simply lack the educational expertise**. They are run and built like software companies, and their founders are often hopelessly clueless as to how (language) learning works.

All of this is somewhat upsetting, because beyond all the fancy advertisements, talks of credentials, “success guarantees”, etc. **demands are simply not being met**.

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## A Minimalist Approach

After my first frustrating experience dealing with teaching platforms, I wanted to see if I could build something better. I asked myself what is the most simple, most flexible way to implement a live learning situation on the net with minimum friction.

Applying Murphy's law in reverse, I started brainstorming. I didn't want to pay huge license fees for using complicated classroom software which had too many features that could all potentially fail. I didn't want to build a huge online learning community with user profiles and forums. I wanted something dead simple even my grandmother could understand.

And I thought: **Why not try Skype?** Everybody is already using it, just not for teaching. Even non tech-savvy people have a user account and know how to use its basic functions without long-winded explanations. Plus, it's **free**. It turned out to be the perfect choice.

Since then I've been using Skype to teach both German and help people build websites (the native screen sharing capability is a great help).

Here's what you need:

1. **A Skype account**
2. **A website where people can request lessons/sessions. A simple description of your service, including rates and contact form is essential.**
3. **A fail-safe way to handle payments (e.g. PayPal buttons)**

Seems too simple? Of course there are many other things that can be done, but this is the absolute minimum, the three legs on which anyone can easily base his online teaching activities.

Obviously, even if all of these three elements are firmly in place, we still need to get the word out about our service and this is where things get interesting.

## Teachers Are Not Marketers

In the same way that the founders of online teaching start-ups often have no clue

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as to how the actual teaching or learning happens, teachers are often confused when told to “market” themselves. Virtually all teaching platforms tell their teachers to post links to their user profiles on Facebook and Twitter, post in the forums and send internal messages to potential students.

No matter if teachers actually attract paying students by this, they are driving traffic to the teaching platform.

On top of that, if they do receive a paying student, they have to pay the teaching platform **commission**, meaning they have to give away part of what they earn – in some cases even up to 50%! What do these teaching platforms do for teachers? In most cases, the answer is: not much.

Sometimes the company will invest in **advertisement campaigns** to drive more traffic to their site.

Their business model is built on the fact that if enough teachers use their site, they can make a profit from the commissions.

So the teachers teach, get paid, and the company takes a bite. They put part of the commission into their pocket and part of it into advertising. Not just more students see these ads, but also more teachers, lured by the promise of making a living online. Then there’s lots of friction in the forums between the teachers all trying to “get” students. Sometimes, there’s a deal and a teacher gets paid, and the company takes a bite again. More ads go up, more students (and teachers) create user accounts, and so on and so forth.

You know what’s wrong with this picture?

- Advertising targets the **lowest common denominator**.

These sites don’t just get clicks from serious students. By putting themselves up on the soap box they attract all kinds of people that range from “just curious” to “learning yes, paying no!” The result is an infinite amount of empty, inactive or even spammy user profiles.

- **Advertising doesn’t improve the quality of a site or service**

The main reasons for using these teaching platforms in the first place are that a)

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they promise to connect you to students and b) to advertise your lessons. But in the end it all amounts to “marketing” yourself by driving traffic to your user profile. Don’t expect these platforms to do anything for you!

In other words: there is no significant advantage in “going with the flock”. You might just as well build your own little site. But here again we have the same problem. Once your site is built, how will you attract students?

Contrary to what people believe, you don’t need to pay hundreds of dollars for advertising your new homepage, in fact – and I know many people will disagree – **there isn’t a need at all for advertising.**

For those who are independently wealthy and can spend ridiculous amounts of money on ads, it sure can’t hurt. But for all the others, I suggest something else.

### Traffic Means Trust

I’ve said it before that paying for ads doesn’t magically increase the quality of a site or service. Instead it simply increases the sheer *quantity* of people exposed to it, which can lead to a lot of confusion and wasted time.

Instead of juxtaposing numbers of visitors with numbers of dollars, why not focus on *quality*? Then, the traffic (and students) will come almost effortlessly.

One of the best ways to do this is by simply helping people. Yes, helping people: for free! (What sounds counter-intuitive to an economist mindset is actually obligatory for this particular approach to online business.)

For example, it is highly recommended to create a blog on your site and write articles on a regular basis that talk to potential clients. And, no: promotional language (“buy my stuff”) is not enough. You have to show that **a) you know what you’re talking about** and **b) give people a reason to care.**

If you cannot prove to your visitors that you are an *expert* (whether self-taught or classically trained) and have a serious interest in helping people make a progress, don’t expect them to care.

If on the other hand you put out high value on a consistent basis, you will end up with a strong reader- or followership that respects you for the quality of your

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performance. Although you aren't charging for any of this content, each one of your articles will be an investment in the future of your online business.

In addition to that, you will be able to network with your readers, gain supporters and friends, not just customers or clients.

This is why the term "marketing" doesn't really apply to what we're talking about here. Marketers are often masters of deception, making us believe in things we have no need for. The form of marketing I'm talking about here lacks this element of deception. It's based on the simple fact that if you want people to trust you (which is a basic requirement for learning and business) you have to stand as an example.

Put value on the table. And if you're serious and skillful, people will recognize and appreciate it. There's no mystery here. This has nothing to do with bending the truth, but it has everything to do with communication skills. And, after all, if you're a (language) teacher, this should be an area in which you excel quite naturally.

In some ways this article is the cornerstone of my whole approach to online teaching. The basic premise here is that one does not need to be a programmer or marketing specialist to make a living as an independent online teacher. It definitely helps to have some experience in setting up webpages but it's a skill that can be learned by following tutorials and reading blogs. Secondly, it's a call for teachers to not silently accept the procedures (and high commissions) of online teaching platforms but to embrace skills that go beyond the mere teaching and build their own mini-schools by using freely available software.

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## Three Ways to Leave a Legacy

In the last article we talked about the fundamentals of becoming an online teacher by building your own homepage. Now let's take a closer look at how you can establish your own legacy instead of indirectly fueling an impersonal brand that will eventually forget about your efforts.

If you work as a teacher for a teaching platform, once the startup goes down, all your efforts will go down with it. Imagine driving traffic to your profile on a teaching platform for many months, which is hard work, and then the site closes down: you have to start again from zero. If you build your own homepage early on and drive traffic there instead to a platform you don't have any control over, you are only winning. This way you can establish yourself as an influence in your field, instead of being just one of a thousand teachers working under the banner of yet another short lived "community".

### 1. Writing Articles

One of the best ways to show people what you're all about (both as teacher and fellow human being) is to write articles on your blog. Not only is this a great way of gaining **exposure**, it will also help you **reflect** how you come across and thus improve your presentation. Nobody wants to read how passionate, knowledgeable and perfect a person is, if he or she can't embody those traits in action. The first rule of Creative Writing is: **Show, Don't Tell!** – In the same way, save your readers the trouble of advertising yourself. Do your thing, be unique – say what you really think, not what people want to hear, and there will be no need to advertise, as your articles spread themselves through the Social Media landscape.

### 2. Creating Materials

During my teaching career I've seen a lot of materials, mountains of exercises, worksheets, etc. Many so-called professional **textbooks** are created by academics. This is great, but not always do they have adequate **field experience** and know what works in a classroom situation when push comes to shove.

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We now live in a time where almost anyone can publish almost anything. What it means is that maybe for the first time in history publication is not reserved for those with enough power or money on their hands. Instead, everyone who has something to say, can do so – with **minimal costs and maximum impact**.

A great way to establish yourself as an authority in your field is to create (free) e-publications or worksheets. Their production is relatively easy. You can include graphics, create stunning layouts and complex structures with free software like *Open Office*. Then you can offer your work as a download. Note: although it's relatively easy to get something up and running within a very short time, quality should always come first. I've seen a lot of ebooks which mean well, but simply don't feel right in terms of design or just regurgitate the same old information.

For more ideas about language learning materials, check out how traditional textbooks and exercise sheets are done. Imitate the ideas that work well. Ditch the rest. If you're not sure how to do something particular, Google is your friend. (Example: "how to add page numbers in Open Office", etc.) So far, I've found the answer to 99% of my tech-related questions by googling.

Also, there is always the question whether to offer your books as free downloads or premium products. I'd recommend to do both! Especially in the beginning it can be helpful to have a free product to get the action going. Once you have established yourself, it will get a lot easier to offer premium products and services.

### 3. Running a Community

One of the more interactive ways of getting people to know you, is to run a group/page on Facebook or a similar service. There are many ways to do this, but (at the time of this writing) Facebook simply lends itself to it because of its ridiculously large user-base.

This means engaging the audience on a daily basis or every few days by

- asking **questions** that prompt the members to express themselves like "What's your favorite color, food, etc.?"
- asking the users to finish **sentence stems** like "If I were a millionaire ..."  
(this is a very good way of teaching grammar)

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- uploading **pictures** and asking people to describe what they see
- etc.

These are only a few of the things that have proven to work. It's really up to you to experiment and see what is most helpful for learners. A few things to keep in mind:

1. Keep most of the content **free and accessible** to a wide range of people! You can still advertise premium services or products once in a while, but your page should be more than just a stream of classified ads.
2. **Don't be too pedantic** when learners make mistakes. Correct comments only when asked for, or when you can do it in an **encouraging, non-destructive** way! One of the best ways is to create conversations about why certain solutions are better, and very often you will even see students correcting each other in a spirit of **mutual support**.
3. If you manage to create a feeling of trust, people will be very active and recommend your page (and the content you post there) to their friends. This way you don't have to worry about advertising but can continue doing what you do best: **creating stimulating content & conversation**.
4. Doing all of this will take a lot of time and effort. Since it's not the only thing you do, you'll have to find ways of organizing your time to achieve maximum productivity.

By the way, it's very interesting to note that commercial learning institutions don't always excel in creating communities. On the contrary, the best groups/pages that I have seen are run by individuals like you and me, not by corporate giants.

On a final note, of course it's best if you can find a strategy that incorporates all of the three points mentioned: writing articles, creating materials and running a group. Most of the time, though, it's realistic to **focus on one of these areas first and expand, later** – especially if you still have a day-job to look after.

Some people might wonder what creating ebooks, writing blog posts or hanging out on Facebook has to do with teaching online. At first glance, nothing. I still remember the day when a teacher from a well known private school asked me how

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he could get started teaching online. When I told him to start a blog, he was confused and (unsurprisingly) not very happy with my advice. He couldn't understand what one had to do with the other. He said he was simply looking for an easy job of 3-4 hours work per day (from 8:00 to 12:00) that would get him an additional income. This fragmented attitude is a good example of why many people quickly give up on online teaching. We can't simply apply factors known from offline teaching such as fixed hours, fixed income and fixed activities to the online world. To make it as an online teacher, there has to be a willingness to put up with very flexible hours, flexible income and an ever-changing and continuously expanding range of activities, from building a homepage to producing content. Not only will all these non-teaching activities enable and promote the actual teaching, they will also open up new venues and business opportunities.

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## Don't Become A Self-Promoter

I've heard many times from my colleagues working in traditional education that they feel **society doesn't gives enough respect to their teaching efforts** and that this is reflected in their salaries and in the way schools are organized. Classes are over-stuffed with students, budgets are cut, staff is overworked. This is why many teachers are looking for other teaching opportunities *online*.

### Leaving the Sinking Ship

For some it's a refreshing awakening into a world of endless possibilities. Others simply don't know *where to start!* The independent online teacher doesn't work for a school or for a company. He answers to no one and nothing except the benefit of his students. This guarantees a maximum of flexibility and minimizes financial or professional compromises one might face while working in a more rigid environment. But before people reach that stage, they often take a different route.

### Sizing Up The Elephant

Many people start out by registering in one of these online teaching marketplaces that claim to connect teachers looking for students with students looking for teachers. There, you don't simply have lessons on a consistent basis. Instead, you have to compete with hundreds of other teachers, each self-promoting themselves to death and pushing prices down while all that you get from the marketplace provider is some measly rating-system and a not always fully-functioning virtual classroom.

Looking at all of this in retrospect, it is hard for me to understand why I put up with it in the first place. One of the obvious reasons was that the marketplace provider promised to hook me up with students. But even then, it's not like I was getting anything for free. I had to work hard just to get *started*. And then, once I got things up and running they kept changing the platform without warning.

As we've already discussed, **you can only win by leaving the marketplace**. And, in fact, it's not that you're actually leaving anything. You're entering the *real*

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*market*, instead. (Many online learning marketplaces try to make you feel that you're lost without them. That's bogus!)

### Standing on The Market With Cold Hands And Wet Feet

Now you've escaped. Gone, the warm and fuzzy feelings of a fake security. You've left the herd. Now what? Maybe you've already built a little homepage and installed a contact form and payment buttons. But what to do next? Should you put yourself on the pedestal and start shouting "Education for Everyone!"? Probably not. Do you have millions of dollars to spend on advertising. Nope. So, what to do? After all, you're not a *marketer*, right? And my answer is: **if you're a great teacher, you'll be a natural at "marketing"**, not in the way economics students think but in a more essential and original way!

### "How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Market"

The skills which make business people succeed in the market and teachers succeed in the classroom aren't as different as they might seem at first glance. **In order to sell something you have to make your potential buyers see the value.** In order to teach something, especially if it's difficult, the learner has to see a certain value in what is being taught, and if this *perceived value* isn't there, the teacher has to help create it.

In other words, if you're teaching arithmetics to 3rd graders and they don't care about it you have to "*advertise*" it. It's the same for starting your online teaching business. **You have to find ways to get people interested.**

One of the traditional ways to help students become interested is to make a topic as vivid as possible. In our example of teaching arithmetics, instead of handing out worksheets with exercises right in the beginning, one could first stage a play in which each student embodies a "number" and then demonstrate addition and subtraction by having them wander around the classroom.

No matter what approach we take, the more creative the better. It's the same for getting people interested in your online business. Demonstrate the value of your service, make it as vivid as possible. This is why immediately after having set up

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your homepage you should **start a blog!** Get accustomed to posting consistently (hard at first, easier later) and try to demonstrate (not explain!) why learning with you works.

Sometimes I wish that my high school teachers would have had to do this as part of their training. Because when you write a blog about what you do you start to ask questions like:

- “What is it that I have to give?”
- “Why should anyone bother?”
- “Would I share this with my friends?”
- “How can I make this more compelling?”

And it is at this point that you start doing the real “marketing”. Don’t worry about getting it right immediately. Perseverance and continuity are more important than perfection. In other words, keep blogging at a regular pace (1 or 2 articles per week) and collect feedback from friends and Social Media.

### Self-Promotion vs Service Promotion

We all hate selfish people. The self-promoter is the worst kind of all, because of his clumsy attempts to get your attention. Especially on Twitter and Facebook this species has found a new breeding ground. (See also the chapter about “Monological Broadcasters” in [A Mindful Guide to Social Media](#).)

So, while many people recommend that if you market something online it should be *personal* – nobody wants an impersonal brand talking to them, we want real people – **don’t make it all about you, either.**

And this is actually a very important point: if you go independent and you write a blog about what you do, trying to make people *see the value* and get to take lessons with you, there is no school, headmaster or Ministry of Education to hide behind.

This is why many online teachers start promoting their *person*, buying a domain with their name and taking it from there.

While that’s not really a bad idea I would actually suggest not to focus too much

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on *your person*. To keep you from falling into this black hole of navel-gazing and tooting your own horn, come up with a project title, give your website a funny name and inject it with your *personality*, instead.

This way you can keep the doors open for new ideas (and other people) and **you won't get in the way of your own progress.**

The thing is that when you don't make everything about *you* you are infinitely more resourceful. It's the same phenomenon like when other people are in need of help we can give lots of advice but when we suffer from the same thing ourselves we are as helpless as the proverbial beetle on its back.

Personally, I never liked the idea of turning myself into a "brand". Many Internet marketers recommend that you base your business on this "brand of you" but I think it's just a lazy way out: despite the widespread practice of putting big mugshots of oneself in the banner of one's self-titled homepage, it doesn't really demonstrate anything except good looks (or having an expensive photographer).

I don't know about you, but it takes more to convince me than smiling people in suits who tell me that they're experts. Again: don't be afraid of filling your project with personality. But don't make it *all about yourself!*

After reading this article it should be clear that my experiences with online teaching platforms were less than rosy, and I've tried more than one. They all seem to be befallen by the same fate. It's not just that harsh competition puts lesson prices in a race for the bottom, also behind the facade of friendship and support between teachers, there's often a sense of distrust, each one eyeing the ratings and reviews of the other and wondering how much they might make, especially the "star teachers" who receive special promotion. In any case, it was a rat race, in my experience. The only way for me to make a decent living without selling out was to set up my own homepage and create content, and while I'm aware that this requires some effort and creativity, it's a lot of fun, too!

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# 5 Quick Ways To Find Students For Your Online Tutoring Business

Here are 5 ways to promote your tutoring services online, whether you are listed on a marketplace or work independently with your own website.

## 1. Free Classified Ads

Free classified ads can be a great way to attract the attention of potential students. One of the best known classified ads sites in the U.S. is probably Craigslist. But there are many others. Simply google “free classified ads” or the equivalent in your language, i.e. “Kostenlose Kleinanzeigen” in German or “petites annonces gratuites” in French, etc. The principle is simple. You post...

- a short description of your service, e.g. Physics Tutoring
- a bit of info about who you are, what technology you use (Skype, virtual classrooms, etc.)
- what are the prerequisites for students to participate (working microphone, Flash-based browser, etc.)
- price per hour, 45 minutes or half an hour

Then, whoever is interested can contact you through the website, email or telephone number you listed under contact options.

**Note:** Many of these sites are built to connect people locally and you have to select a certain radius like a city, state, etc. where you want to be listed. Since, as an online tutor you can connect world-wide it might be useful to list yourself in several areas if the directory is highly location-based.

## 2. Social Media

Using Social Media is a must for anyone trying to generate serious business nowadays, whether one person home-businesses or huge corporations.

The question is just: how?

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Obviously, mass-adding people on Facebook and spamming your network of “friends” with offers for private tutoring won’t do the trick.

There’s a lot of advice on this all over the Net, so I’ll just say one thing: Social Media is obligatory. But it has to be tied in with other efforts and will fail if not supported by a blogging campaign or other form of content marketing.

### 3. Tutoring Directories

There are many directories online where tutors can list their services. Google “tutor directories”. Basically, this is similar to posting free classified ads, with the only difference that it’s focused on teaching and tutoring.

Please note that there are many old and shady websites promising to hook you up with students. Don’t pay any upfront fees. Check if you can find other people talking about their experience with these sites. As a general rule, don’t sign up for anything that you wouldn’t use yourself to find a tutor.

### 4. SEO-Optimization

This is a topic that many non-technically minded people will shy away from. SEO stands for Search Engine Optimization. Part of the problem is that there are too many self-appointed gurus and prophets in the field who claim to know what works and what doesn’t, while in reality it’s a) the search-engines themselves and b) the millions of people searching everyday that shape the ever-changing algorithms.

Nevertheless, there is a common sense approach to this: finding your keywords. Let’s say I’m a French tutor. What is the name of my blog or homepage? For the sake of example, let’s say we call it “French Lessons From Paris”. “French Lessons” is a good key phrase. By using the [Google keyword tool](#) I can see that every month 246,000 people are looking for this phrase. On the other hand, Google also tells me that the competition on this phrase is “medium”. The phrase “learn French”, however, gets 550,000 searches per month and competition is “low”. After this research, maybe we should change our website title to “Learn French With a Parisian”.

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In the next steps, we should be careful what keywords or key phrases blog posts and their titles contain. Let's say I write a post titled "Why Anyone Can Learn French" and in the article itself I plant the key phrases "learn French" and "trench lessons" a few times. If I don't overdo it, it will tell Google to show that article whenever people search for "learn French".

Obviously, there's a lot more to say about this. But theoretically, all you have to do is find a phrase or a collection of keywords and continuously use them.

This can prove to be rather difficult, especially in the online tutoring field, because market place providers and other companies with lots of money dominate the first positions on many keywords due to paid advertising and armies of SEO-specialists.

Tip: instead of trying to compete with the giants, try to find the roads less traveled (keywords and phrases with low or medium competition) until you get results. If your page still stays buried under other search results, keep trying different phrase and combination and research online what you can do from a technical perspective. (make sure whatever resources you find are new, since the rules are changing quickly)

## 5. Blogging

I can't stress enough how important blogging is to attract new students and promote your online teaching activity:

- Each article you write is another potential entry point through the search engines; even through unexpected and unrelated searches people can stumble onto your site. Think of it as building a maze of interconnected doors that all lead people to the center. Even if your keywords are highly competitive, you can use blog posts as back-doors and shortcuts. In the example of our French teacher, above, that could maybe be a highly informative and well written article about a French author or a certain wine, drawing attention of Francophiles all over the world.
- Blogging gives you *meat* for your Social Media efforts. As I've said, no one wants to follow a Twitter account or join a Facebook page that constantly

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toots its own horn. You need content. And instead of posting links to other people all the time, you can mix links to helpful resources with your own articles containing tips, hints, special offers, etc.

- Being listed on a marketplace, classified ads directory and Social Media networks is all great. But you need something to focus these efforts. This is where blogging comes in: your blog is your hub, your home. From there you send out everything and receive traffic and potential customers.

This is a long-term strategy but building a professional blog is the most powerful thing anyone can do online to grow their business.

While some of the points mentioned in this piece may be redundant, I'm glad that I mentioned SEO. There is of course much more that can be said about SEO, but the points mentioned in this article are still valid as a general guideline. It's all about picking a keyword or key phrase and using it in your site's title, domain name, description and in individual blog posts. Coupled with a consistent blogging strategy, this is a strong backbone for any online business.

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Let's look again at what you need to get started:

- your own homepage, on your own domain
- a contact form or other means of requesting lessons
- payment options (e.g. PayPal buttons)
- a blog (ideally on the same domain)
- producing content in the shape of articles, videos, worksheets, blog posts, etc.
- build a Social Media presence and share your content

Regarding the homepage part, I would recommend to buy a domain and then set up a Wordpress-installation. It's easy to install and gives you a lot of control over design, content and everything without having to be a programmer. Also, it's the most convenient way of blogging. (For more information about setting up your own Wordpress installation on your own domain, google it or read [How To Blog: Build An Audience, Boost Your Traffic and Kick-Start Your Business Without Selling Your Soul](#) in which I talk a lot more about technical details, content writing and design options.) If you're just getting started, you might also want to register a free blog at [wordpress.com](http://wordpress.com) first, and learn how the software works.

The contact form feature can be achieved by using either a service like [Wufoo](#) or a Wordpress plugin such as [Contact Form 7](#). To create buttons for lesson payments, the easiest way is to just use PayPal which offers a simple [wizard tool](#) to generate buttons you then can copy and paste onto your site.

About blogging and creating content we've already talked in general terms. [The book](#) mentioned above will tell you even more about the actual writing part, using images, headlines and so on and so forth.

Regarding the Social Media part, again, you will find many tutorials online that teach you the basics. If you're more interested in time-management strategies and how to not get distracted by all of this, you can also download my book [A Mindful Guide to Social Media](#) as a free [PDF](#) or [Kindle](#) version.

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What we haven't discussed yet, are the actual prices for lessons. How much should you charge? Obviously, I can't tell you, but there are some broad guidelines.

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## Rates, Scheduling & More

### **"How much should I charge for one lesson?"**

It highly depends where you live, of course, and how much you need. But here's a general rule of thumb: look at what other teachers, trainers or tutors in your field take for one lesson in your country or local area, whether online or offline. Position yourself at an average. Then, over time, slowly bring up the prices (Offering free trial lessons and discounts will help to get started).

### **"How do I schedule lessons with my students or clients?"**

There are many fancy scheduling tools such as [Doodle](#) or [Tungle](#) but I have never used them. In my experience, things have a way of "just happening" in life. There are sudden visits of old friends, forgotten dentist appointments, broken refrigerators and a million other reasons a meeting will have to be postponed. Using yet another software or web service to keep track of all of this is overkill, in my opinion.

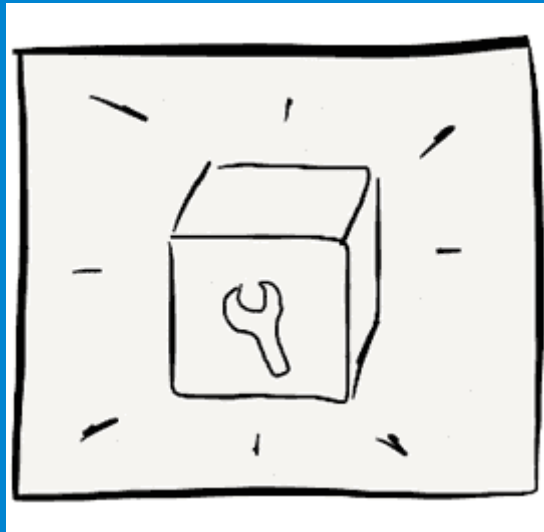
Simply using email and a service like [Google Calendar](#) is more than enough. Also, although in the beginning you'll want to teach as much as possible, make sure to have "recreation islands" in your calendar where you don't take on any meetings (e.g. the weekend). In stressy times these islands keep you from burning out. But keep in mind that the more flexible you are with your scheduling, the more you should charge.

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# III. Teacher's Toolbox



# 3 Reasons Why Online Teachers Should Start Using Google Documents

I advocate a way of teaching online which I call “The Minimalist Approach”. It’s based on the idea to keep educational technology as simple as possible, enabling easy access for everyone. It should connect people and stay out of focus. Period. That could mean using Skype or Skype-like technology for establishing an audio/video connection. But this is only the beginning.

As my colleague Sylvia Guinan pointed out in her article [Why Skype is The Simplest Way To Get Started Teaching” Online](#) you can also easily use whatever third-party tools, materials and websites you like. If you’re already teaching with this “virtual blank canvas” approach as she put it, one tool that I’d absolutely recommend trying out is Google Documents. Here’s why:

## 1. Interactivity

Google Documents is a powerful tool. But mainly it does one thing: allow two or more people to work on a document, presentation, spreadsheet etc. at the same time. This is perfect for online teaching! Instead of presenting learners with fixed explanations, you can let them create a mind-map during the lesson. You can let your student fill in worksheets in real-time and give supportive feedback on the side as they are writing, letter by letter. Conventional exercises such as match the phrases or match pictures with phrases can be used creatively, drawing connecting lines or crossing out things directly on screen. Not only does it allow teachers to introduce visual markers such as shapes and colors, it also provides students with the option to *jump in* and edit, manipulate, change and move around all of the elements – turning the fixed textbook or worksheet into a creative experience. In my experience, kids especially love this. Not only can they express their creativity, they can also learn the basics of using drawing programs, text processors, etc. while being active.

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## 2. Collaboration

In a face-to-face environment when teachers use the medium of blackboard, projector or worksheet there's a perspective gap. The teacher sees the blackboard from a different angle than the students, to some the projected image is blurred, to others clear, there's a lot of craning, stretching and squinting going on.

If you use a tool like Google Documents each of the participants sees the exact same thing. Sometimes when teachers give an assignment in face-to-face situations they look over the shoulders of the learners, trying to give feedback or offer support but more often than not it's a bit awkward. Some students feel, rightly so, that this invades their personal space; they feel observed, although the teacher only wants to help.

Google Documents allows the teachers to look right through the learner's eyes, improving the ability to give feedback while reducing the feeling of "being observed".

## 3. Simplicity

So, this is all great but some people will ask what makes using Google Documents so different from using a Virtual Classroom with integrated whiteboard. Good question. The answer: simplicity!

- no need to sign up for anything. You can send learners a link and start writing and drawing immediately
- documents save themselves automatically every few seconds so that if there's a crash, nothing is lost
- existing documents can easily be shared or re-used in other lessons
- even after the lesson is over the student has full access to view, edit and print the document
- it's not flash-based, so it's widely compatible and comparatively stable

Also, Google Documents is free. Most VCs are not. And where whiteboards focus on the drawing aspect, Google Documents is like a fully functioning Office suite,

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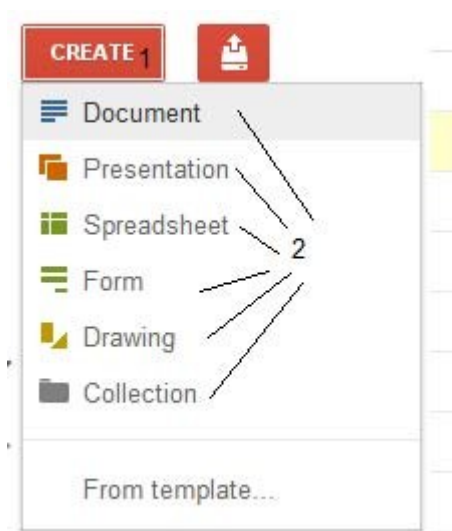
only online, free and collaboration-based. Recently, they re-designed its interface to make it even easier to use.

### Getting Started in Less Than 10 Seconds

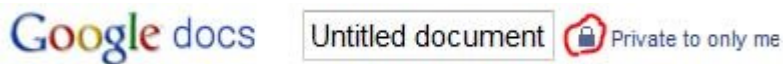
If you've never used it before, here's a quick rundown: Go to [docs.google.com](https://docs.google.com) (you *do* need a google account for *creating* documents) and

**1. Click *create***

**2. Select a type**



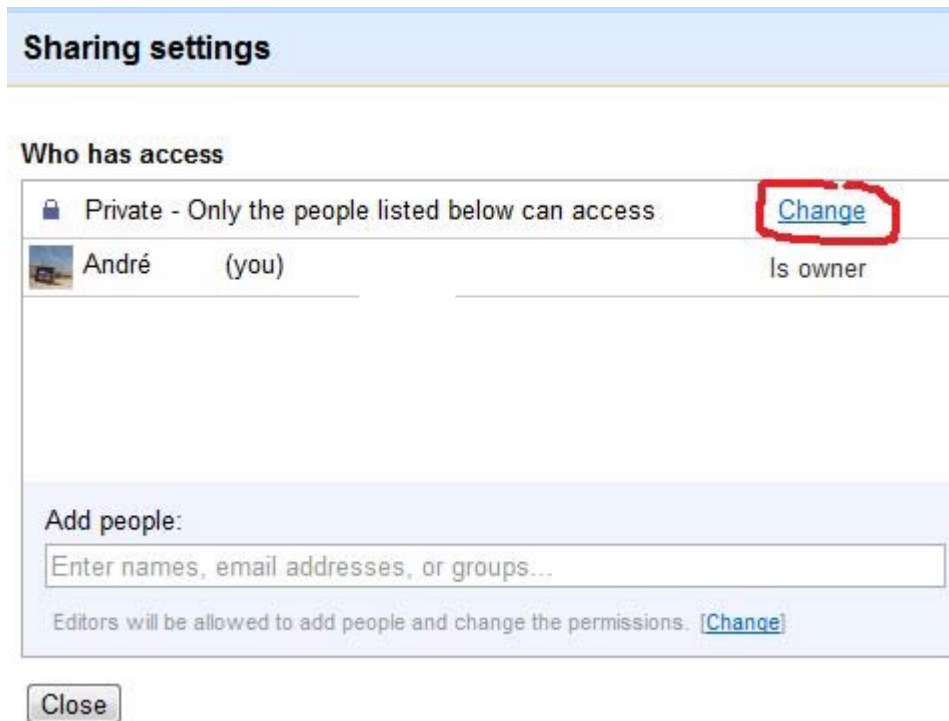
**3. Click on the locker symbol**



**4. Click *change***

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**5. Select a sharing-mode (e.g. “public + allow anyone to edit”)**

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**Sharing settings**

**Visibility options:**

☒

**Public on the web**  
Anyone on the Internet can find and access. No sign-in required.

☐

**Anyone with the link**  
Anyone who has the link can access. No sign-in required.

☐

**Private**  
Only people explicitly granted permission can access. Sign-in required.

**Edit access:**

☒

Allow anyone to edit (no sign-in required)

Note: Items with any visibility option can still be published to the web. [Learn more](#)

Save

Cancel

[Learn more about visibility](#)

Then you can simply hit save and share the link.

Google Docs: a great tool for real-time collaboration. I always use it when students write a text and we need to discuss and correct it together.

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## The Quest For The Perfect Whiteboard

Allegedly, the blackboard or chalkboard was invented by the Scotsman James Pillans (1778–1864) who according to his book *Physical and Classical Geography* (1854) taught Geography with it in Edinburgh. Since 1801 George Baron is supposed to have used a blackboard in his maths lessons at West Point.

Although many schools have begun to replace blackboards with whiteboards, this 200 year old technology is still far from dying out...

When I was working in school, I came home everyday with the traces of my profession: chalk dust – on my sleeves and in my lungs. The blackboard was my closest ally. It was the primary medium. It was a canvas for abstract visualizations, a message board, a playing field for the 3rd graders eagerly awaiting that five minutes of hang-man.

Over time I developed a host of successive drawings for each grammatical issue and orthographic aberration, all filed in my brain and ready to be reproduced for new students at any given moment.

### Going Digital

When I began teaching online, I experimented with various Virtual Classrooms. Most of them came with a digital whiteboard and while they mostly served the purpose, I ditched the VCs for other reasons in my personal teaching practice. Either they were overly complex, buggy or both. I didn't want to waste time at the beginning of each session to explain new-comers how to get that annoying flash-based microphone input working, etc.

So, I went for something more pragmatic: Skype, the software which has become synonymous with making free worldwide audio and video calls. Everyone already has it installed. Everyone knows how to use it. It comes with screen-sharing, which is great. What about whiteboards? There are *tons* of Skype add-ons (software packages that can be downloaded and installed similar to extensions in a browser) but ... surprise, surprise ... both parties need to have an add-on installed for it to do its magic.

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Experience has shown that when push comes to shove, the Skype add-on system is too complicated and confusing and ultimately time-wasting if you just want to quickly jot down and/or visualize something.

So, as nice as the many third-party extensions may be, they have proven to be rather useless in practice. What to do? I've experimented with other [Java](#)-based whiteboards but either they were buggy or incompatible with some devices. Did I give up on visualizing in online teaching? Of course not. For the most part, I have been using [Google Docs Draw](#). But there were three things that I missed:

- there's no free-hand drawing tool! (sometimes you just want to get in there and make some quick scrawls...)
- if you want to draw or add text on top of a worksheet or image, there's no way to *lock* or fix the background layer. In practice that's like trying to write on a super-slippery surface. Very annoying!
- Sometimes Google Docs asks people to log-in even when you got a doc set on "no login required" which makes it basically useless for people who don't have a Google Account (yes, they do exist!)

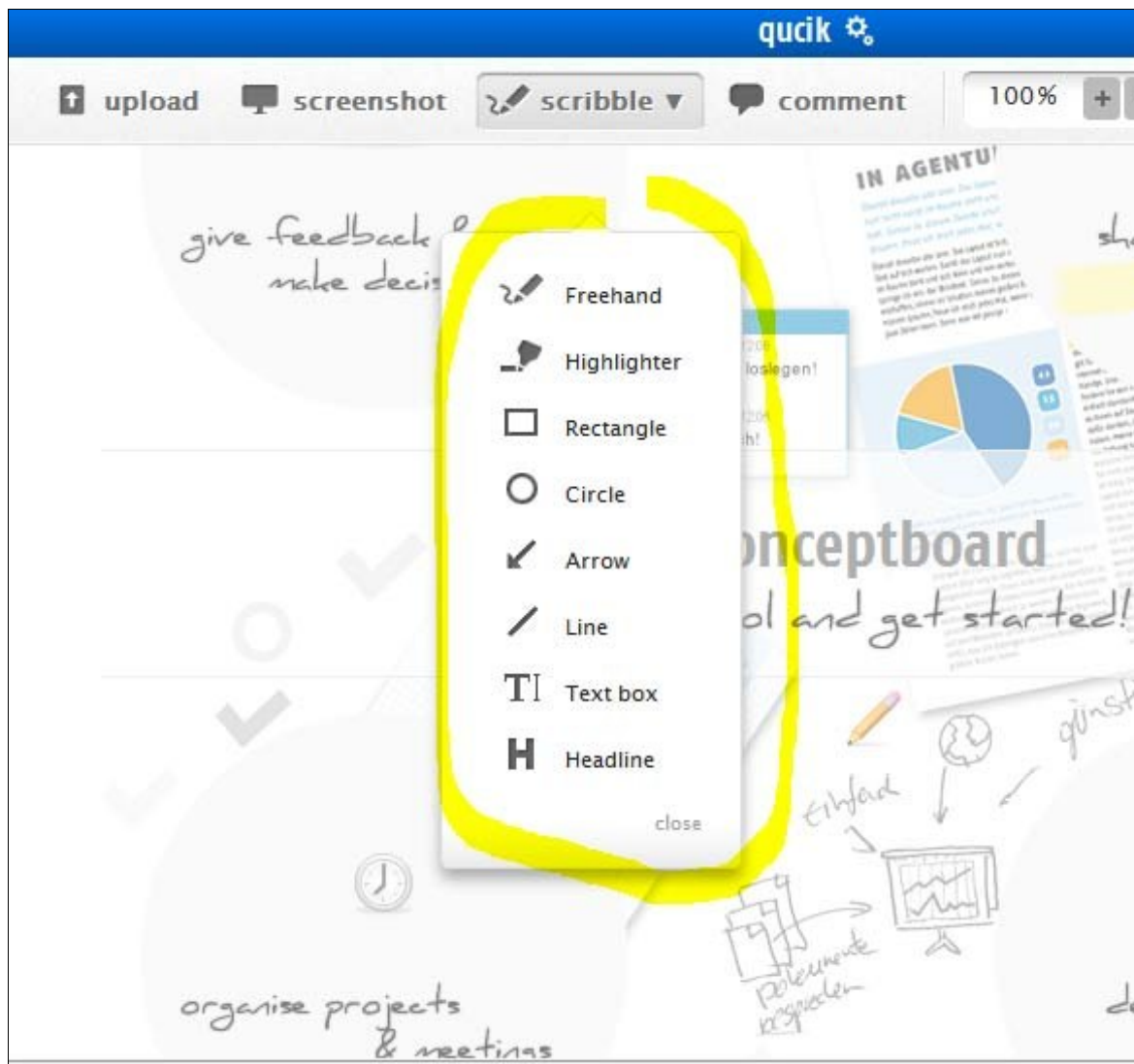
All of these things seem rather trivial and I wonder why Google hasn't done anything about them yet. But there is hope.

### **Conceptboard: The Perfect Whiteboard?**

It all started when Kay Alexander published a post on [edukwest](#) about the German start-up Conceptboard rolling out an integration for Google+. Never having heard of it, I immediately tried out [Conceptboard](#). And it might just be the best alternative to Google Docs Drawing. Its features are very simple and powerful and you can see almost all of them in the screenshot, below:

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Here's what's interesting about Conceptboard from an Online Teaching perspective:

- the upload button allows users to integrate drawings and whole PDFs with many pages that then can be drawn, scribbled or written upon without the danger of having these background layers slip and slide.
- to invite participants, just copy the URL and share them with students and

collaborators: There is **no need to sign up or log-in** for them.

Conceptboard asks participants to pick a name they want to be identified with on the board but they can also just join as “guest”.

- **Presenter-Mode:** Have people follow your cursor across the board and focus what you focus on.

An important factor of these online tools is simplicity, stability and velocity. So far, Conceptboard has passed all my tests. With the help of a quick Chrome app you can create a new board and share it within 2 to 3 clicks from the get-go. So, within just a few seconds everyone is on the same map.

It remains to be seen over time whether [Conceptboard](#) is robust enough to weather all the different scenarios of online teaching. I’m especially looking forward to use it in lessons with my younger students. If it doesn’t break *then*, then it’s really stable!

I did test it with the kids in the meantime and they have become its biggest fans, we use it almost in every lesson to fill in worksheets, solve riddles and more. Also, sometimes when they want to explain something but lack the word, I invite them to draw what they mean. They even manage to produce almost flawless handwriting with a mouse, something that most adults shy away from. In any case, Conceptboard is the most stable whiteboard I have ever seen. In just a few seconds a new board can be created, the URL shared through the Skype chat and the visualizing begins!

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# Watching YouTube Videos Without The Distractions

Whether we love YouTube for its endless amount of funny cat videos or hate it for its often vile and hostile comment-sections, **we all use it.**

If you are a teacher you know that a successful lesson is based on both good planning and a certain amount of improvisation. Sometimes you prepare a video to introduce a new concept, other times you are launching into a conversation and suddenly remember this and that song or clip you once saw – and especially in the latter case – **YouTube is always a good place to get results *fast*.**

Now, our tolerance levels of being bombarded with stimuli and all kinds of information are rising on a horrifying scale. Using YouTube has almost become synonymous with being in a mindset of *fuzzy focus*. Only a certain part of the screen shows the video, the rest of it shows “related content”, links to other videos, thumbnails, titles, short descriptions, and, yes – the comments.

This is the reason why I always was skeptical to send students to YouTube during a lesson. The danger of losing them on one of those (mostly) unrelated “other things” was simply too high. Some virtual classrooms allow you to splice a YouTube video directly into the classroom and phase out all the other stuff.

But if you’re using a more intuitive and simple interface like Skype you want to be able to just say: “Hey, here’s a link to a video – check it out!” without launching an avalanche of distraction on your student. Luckily, there’s hope: QuieTube. What it does:

- It gets rid of all of the distractions (related videos & comments)
- It creates a link for you to share

How does it work? There are a variety of ways you can use it:

- Bookmark (see [tutorial](#))
- [GreaseMonkeyScript](#) (if you don’t know what that is, don’t use it)
- [Google Chrome Extension](#) (my favorite)

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## Personal Experience

Since I found [QuieTube](#) I feel a lot better to send my students YouTube links. Especially with children it is important to **eliminate distractions** right from the start. Of course it also helps adults if they can devote all of their attention to one thing and one thing only.

But even then, it's important not to rely too much on tools like this. They won't do the job *for you!* Machines and software don't necessarily help us focus. In some cases, they make it even harder! And it is only a few years before the first generation that grew up on attention-frenzy media as popularized by YouTube will be running the show.

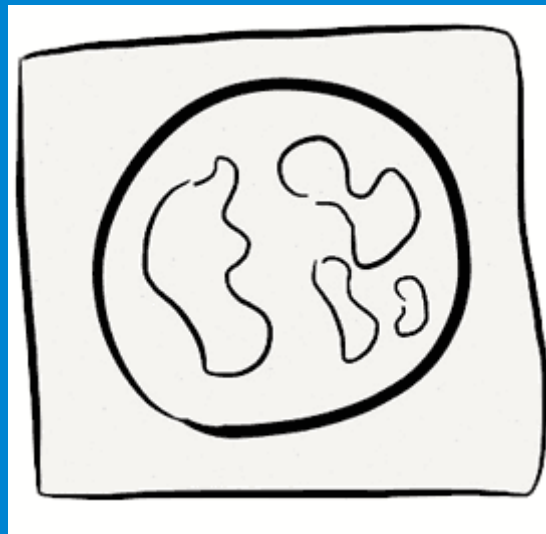
Until then, let's hope we get the hang of it. (I highly recommend Howard Rheingold's book "Net Smart" and its chapters about *infotention*)

It's a great tool that I still use very frequently. Unfortunately, when a YouTube account has disabled embedding of its videos, it won't work. Fortunately, that's rare. Also, some teachers who have experienced full YouTube integration in a Virtual Classroom might find it inconvenient that they have to open a browser, copy the URL and send it to a student via the Skype chat. It's not just a matter of convenience, it's also related to a paradigm-shift. Whereas the VC tries to recreate the conditions of the offline classroom as a "closed system", working with interconnected modules like Skype for audio/video, GoogleDocs for documents, ConceptBoard for visualization, etc. opens up infinite possibilities and has the advantage that when one module breaks, the rest continue to function, whereas when a VC crashes, everything goes down with it. In addition to that, it invites learners to be more active during the lessons (opening and closing windows, apps and documents, etc.) while the broadcast-approach of the VC mimics the TV-era passivity of data-consumption.

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# IV. The “Real World”



## Online Education for Children

Before I started teaching online, I was not only lacking knowledge and experience, I was also skeptical. I had been working so many years in classrooms with blackboards and dusty white chalk, carrying books and scrawling remarks with red ink into the margins of exercise sheets that I couldn't think of anything else.

How could all that possibly be replaced by a computer? A lifeless machine? What I found is that **it can't be replaced**, instead traditional education can only be *augmented* by using technology.

Interestingly, maybe the biggest difference is that learning online is far more intensive, in a small amount of time a lot more can be *done* in terms of learning and thoroughly digging through problems and solutions together.

Efficiency is a nice argument, but what strikes me even more is the different *quality* of the lesson time itself. Especially younger students (aged 7-12) seem to get the hang of it immediately and dive right in. Curiously, when you tell some people about learning online they seem to be confused and ask questions like: "But isn't that a bit sad to *hide* behind the screen?"

Especially regarding children everyone is very *concerned!* "That can't be good for them, can it?"

My experience working with children always shows me how deeply prejudiced we actually are about technology, although we don't really seem to admit it – and I don't take myself out of it. As I said, I also was skeptical at first. But I didn't grow up with the Internet, like them. Mobile phones simply didn't exist. I saw them slowly sliding into existence.

Kids have the advantage of being **natives in the digital world**. To them, technology in general and digital communication in particular is nothing "artificial" or out of the ordinary. Instead, it seems, it is treated as running water or oxygen. It's taken for granted. And that's it. It doesn't mean that everything is perfect and they won't make mistakes, quite on the contrary – but their basis for learning about

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using technology is infinitely stronger because the fear or the hype is lacking.

Working with children in live online lessons is still one of the most exciting parts of my career up to this day. The way they use technology continues to surprise me and in the end, it seems, I've learned a lot more from them, although I'm technically playing the teacher role.

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## How Schools Breed Violence

Personally, I experienced much of my “obligatory schooling” as utterly meaningless and with no relation to my life, present or future. Except the occasional interesting lesson and teachers who recommended out-of-the-ordinary books to me not because they had to, but because they wanted to, the main point of going to school in the first place was meeting friends.

But even later, when I was in school from the other side, as a teacher, I had the same feeling that something there was fundamentally wrong. Let’s have a look at the well-known but often overlooked conditions of public schools:

- too many students in one classroom
- they are not allowed to move (except at designated times)
- they are not allowed to speak (except at designated times)
- normative performance (grades) is valued over self-expression (creativity)

Those are conditions similar to a prison or boot-camp. It sounds shocking, but it’s no less true. Prisoners are not allowed to move freely, army cadets are not allowed to speak freely. And in the same way that schools bow to the normative “God of Grades”, also in the army self-expression, creative thinking or non-normative activity is something to be done out of sight of superiors, which is at best tolerated, at worst punished.

But there’s another problem that comes when you put people together like this. Biologically speaking, human beings are very closely related to pack animals (living in social groups) and - like wolves or our best friends the dog - we are a very territorial species. Looking at the history of war or current political events, this should be clear without further explanations. But it runs deeper than just guarding geographical boundaries.

### Our Territorial Nature

When intruding into the territory of a wild animal, it will often defend its territory by all means. Where wild animals may guard a physical environment, as

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human beings we have a more abstract sense of territory, extended and translated into “owning stuff” (property) and “being someone” (individuality & status), but the basic hard-wiring is the same.

And this is where it gets really interesting. In the science fiction classic [“Stand on Zanzibar”](#) John Brunner writes: “Very baldly, then: shortage of territory, of space to move around and call your own, leads to attacks on members of your own species in defiance even of the normal group-solidarity displayed by pack-animals. Lost your temper with anyone lately?”

In other words: **shortage of physical or psychological territory leads to violent behavior.**

Armies all over the world know this. They use this principle by putting individuals into dormitories and out of their civilian clothing, stripping them of both their privacy and individual identity. By nature, human beings aren’t built to kill, but if you systematically tread on their personal “territory” you can see the aggression building up.

Of course our schools are not deliberately designed to create violence, but as we can see from the many incidents appearing in schools all over the world, the violence is there.

And saying it’s the fault of computer games just blurs the problem. We need education environments that protect and ensure privacy and comfort to the learner. And it’s not just about physical aggression between students. Furthermore, the emotionally and psychologically hostile environment of public schools, put mildly, is not an ideal situation for learning.

Am I suggesting we get rid of schools and replace teachers with computers? Of course not. Can online-learning restore psychological territory and result in increased learning performance and focus if applied carefully? Certainly.

In some ways, this is the most controversial article in this volume. What may seem like pseudo-scientific speculation on my part may just be that. I don’t claim to be a behavioral psychologist. On the other hand, the thesis here that shortage of

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(psychological) space leads to (psychological) violence is the closest I've ever come to understanding the often violent scenes I've witnessed both as a teacher and in the many different schools I attended until my graduation.

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## Is e-Learning Anti-Social?

It is no secret that online-learning, e-Learning, e-tutoring (whatever the many names for it...) is still viewed sceptically by many learners, teachers and public spokespersons. Is it based on a lack of experience, or a truly justified concern?

First of all, it needs to be said that an accurate answer of this question depends very much on the specific learning group in question. There is no blanket solution or answer to this question but it has to be evaluated individually in each case, if online learning will be truly helpful in order to reach a certain goal.

If we take a group of young adults as an example who are in college, studying business and planning their first business trip to China, it can be very efficient to work together with a Chinese teacher online.

- If you have a packed day, online learning will be the best way to use your limited time. Just think of the time lost in getting to a language school, waiting for buses, traffic jams, etc.
- Another key point is that before you start your journey all around the globe to a distant country and culture you can receive a direct briefing from someone who's already there and knows the territory.
- Also in terms of affordability, online learning can be significantly easier to deal with, especially if you're struggling with high tuition fees, rent, paying books, etc.

The benefits here are obviously many. But how about the downsides? In our example we assume that the college student lives a wholesome life, filled with lectures and activities, homework and projects. In all of these he or she is never alone but always works together with *others*.

In this case online learning cannot possibly be anti-social because the student is *already* engaged in a net of meaningful relations and social connections. Online learning, in this case, can only increase his communicative and social skills, dealing with people from different countries, exchanging ideas and learning about cultural perspectives.

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But what about the prejudice of online learning being anti-social? Is it simply unjustified superstition? Probably not.

What lies at the core of this skepticism is the collective imagination of a young (probably male) person, secluded in a dark messy room with only the computer screen emitting a pale light into this creature's pitiable abode. At school he is being harassed, maybe he's not fulfilling social standards in terms of hairstyle and clothing, and at night he plays violent computer games, the computer his only companion in an otherwise completely hostile and inaccessible environment.

To **summarize** the problem, it is not online learning which is the problem, but the false assumption or fear, that online learning *should* completely substitute conventional modes of learning. Saying that online learning is bad because people need social interaction is just as false an assumption as claiming a linear causality between video-games and violence in schools.

But whether we are talking about online learning or online socializing, it is the same. You cannot substitute meaningful social relations in the world with thousands of virtual friends, but what you can do is **extend** your social life and learning environment to the net and find *new* and different ways of relating. There's nothing anti-social about that, on the contrary, it will improve your social skills and give you a tangible grasp of what can only be called a truly global perspective.

Equating the "real world" with being social and the virtual world with being anti-social used to be a popular practice. Having many "friends" on Myspace was a cause for ridicule. Now, this relation is inverting. Even politicians boast about their follower-count on Twitter. Increasingly, the term "social" has become a trademark referring to a virtual mapping of human relations, not necessarily implying face-to-face encounters. The signing up of the masses to Facebook has done its part to perforate the boundaries between the "real" and the "virtual" for millions of people, but we're still far from a full integration of our online and offline existences. As the two become increasingly blurred and embedded in one another, finding a balance between the two might become an important psychological issue within the next

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few decades. Should be awed by the possibilities of the Net or should we lament the way "things used to be"? Personally, I don't think that there's an answer to these questions. The tension between these realities can't be explained away or "fixed", it can only be lived.

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## Trust, Toys and Technophobia

Talking to colleagues and friends I found out that online learning is still far from becoming part of the everyday educational landscape in many countries. To understand this we need to take a step back and look at general modalities of learning.

### In order to learn you need to trust

This is true for both offline and online learning, no matter what you are studying. It could be anything from playing the piano to ancient languages to professional sports. If you don't trust your teacher, coach or instructor you're wasting your time. Trust does not mean "pouring your heart" and telling your football coach about all your lost loves before the kickoff. No! Trust, here, is a **firm belief that your teacher or coach is capable of leading you forward**. This happens on a gut-level, below or above rationalization or verbalization. You just know. If at first you don't, you will after a while, providing that the teacher has really something to offer (if not, why bother?) and that you are actually willing to learn.

In other words: expert knowledge and experience of the teacher is important. But maybe trust is just as important, it being the bridge through which **the teacher's knowledge and experience can become your own**.

### The unlikely pair of Trust & Technology

Do you trust your iPhone to keep your contacts safely stowed away within its memory banks? Do you trust your email software to remember your friends and family? Do you trust your laptop when it tells you there are 10 wireless networks in the area? Trust is probably the wrong word. We take these things for granted (until something goes wrong). But speaking of *trust* in relation to technology feels somewhat odd, doesn't it? Or maybe it is the perfect word for it? In Japanese culture, for example, it's not considered odd to relate to pieces of metal and plastic as if they were alive and breathing. According to a [study by the Educause institute](#),

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online learning seems to be more readily embraced in Japan, it has been done there for almost a decade both on a corporate and private level with high success rates. From 124 credits in traditional education, 60 can be gained through e-learning. So, what does that mean? Does online learning only work in Japan? Do we all have to become like the Japanese?

### **Throw out the Toys, bring in the People!**

If we move our focus westwards to Europe, online learning is still in its infancy. People there have always been skeptical of emerging technology. Remember the [Luddites](#)? Marry Shelley's Frankenstein? The movie Metropolis? Or the story when the locomotive was invented and people claimed it was unnatural and dangerous to travel at those speeds, causing diseases and nervous breakdowns, while for others it simply was "The Devil's!" The reasons for these rejections are many, and as always with phobias, they're highly *irrational*!

Let's take the side of the technophobes for a second and look at online learning: A lot of the start-ups and apps currently on the market seem to be not much more than educational *toys*, satisfying the click-frenzied for a few idle minutes but without any long-lasting effect. Nothing against programmers spending sleepless nights catering to committees to get that little quiz application just right to please the investors breathing down their neck in time. But it has created a climate of automation. On many online learning sites you won't be able to talk to a person before having filled out a dozen forms, profile fields, uploaded your photo, pedantically filled in your available hours, modified your privacy settings and linked your account to your credit card. On yet others, there are no real people. Only "interactive" applications. Automatized mechanisms in a landscape devoid of human contact: bits of software that show you a happy face when you're above the crowd-sourced average, a sad face when you're below.

And again: big online learning sites (so called "portals") are often not driven by teachers that have field-experience. Those are the creations of entrepreneurial business-models fueled by investor capital. There are many teachers on those sites trying to get things to change. But most of the time, their ideas don't make it past the suggestion board.

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## Conclusions

If we want online learning to become accepted as a serious alternative to the “brick & mortar” business, we have to:

- **Throw out the toys! Bring in the people.**
- **Facilitate conversations that create trust.**

So, yes: we use technology to create a connection between remote places. But it's not *about* the technology, at all. In short, if you're a teacher looking to increase awareness of online teaching, **don't talk tech. Create trust!**

In some ways this article is my response to the never-ending procession of new startups and “revolutionary” applications. I've tried many of them and in most cases I still prefer talking to a real person over filling out profiles and doing online quizzes. This piece of writing was an attempt to re-establish the importance of human connections as a didactical force, but I'm aware that it's not a question of either/or: the future will probably be more about integrating apps and interactive software with skillful and caring instructors.

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## The Private Tutor Revolution

For a long time in history, education was a meaningful privilege reserved for the wealthy. The idea of free public education for everyone is comparatively young. And it used to be a revolutionary idea. But in the age of smartphones and Social Media, it's lagging behind, staggering, stumbling and falling flat on its face. As pointed out by people left and right, our school system has turned into an [Assembly Line](#) approach: students are treated as goods going in and out of the “knowledge factory”.

Not only is this approach unpractical in times where information is widely accessible, it also isn't compatible with the individual. In schools, students are treated “in batch”, according to age, regardless of their unique talents or abilities. There are attempts to push one reform after the other. But the education system is like a giant rusty colossus, slowly but inevitably stuttering to a halt.

As long as there is compulsory school attendance, wasting many years in classrooms remains a necessary evil. But in the midst of all of this, an old idea is coming to the fore, again.

### Individual Teachers for Individual Students

All the dukes, barons and other aristocrats did it. It is the antithesis of public free education: it's private and costly. The student gets 100% of the attention. The pace and style of the lesson is matched to the individual's capacities. But is it only for royals and future presidents? How expensive is it, really?

### An Old Idea for New Times

Due to the global infrastructure of the Internet, private tutoring is not just more affordable than ever before in history, also the variety you can choose from is growing at a breath-taking pace.

As a side-note, there are many sites that claim to be **the** place to find teachers and tutors. But due to the decentralized nature of the Net the places you can find good teachers are many and changing every day.

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Depending on where a teacher comes from, prices per lessons can be very low or very high. Not all of them will be excellent of course. But neither does it mean that good quality has to cost an arm and a leg. Many teachers offer a free trial or consultation session of sorts so you students don't have to buy a pig in a poke.

But whatever you'll pay in the end, this style of education is not free.

### **Time To Reclaim Responsibility**

One could argue, the assumption that education should be free is what brought on the deterioration of the school-system in the first place, which is constantly struggling with too many students and too little funding. It's a nice idea but reality has shown that this well-fare approach is not sustainable, leading to crowded classrooms and stressed-out teachers.

Also, if the poor condition of our education system is not the government's fault, neither politicians nor parties will be able to fix it. We should ask ourselves instead how highly we value education. Not just the education for a goal, the linear path towards a certificate in order to gain a job the but the learning process which refines a person.

On the one hand, many people don't think twice spending hundreds and thousands of dollars on gadgets, plasma-screens and cell-phone contracts. But what price are we willing to pay for an excellent education tailored to our needs? The problem is not that there is no alternative to education as we know it. The real problem is an under-appreciation of learning. And while the masses are complaining about "poor conditions", more and more people are taking matters into their hands by looking for private teachers online for both themselves and their children.

It is a quiet transformation. A silent revolution. Because genuine change doesn't need to shout. It comes naturally.

Reading this now, I'm wondering whether I found the right words. It all seems a bit aristocratic. And while I'm aware that the deterioration of public education in

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many countries is generally blamed on governmental misspending, not on the people themselves, I deliberately wrote this to provoke readers into reflecting on how much they value education, not as an end but as a means.

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# V. Learning about Learning



## Isolated Approaches

It has become common sense that we have not just one, but two brains - or to be more precise: two specialized parts of the brain. This understanding has become known as “brain lateralization” or “hemispheric brain function”. It has become heavily popularized but rarely do we see actual applications of this knowledge.

Also, the generalizations are so widespread, e.g.: “left brain = structural, right brain = ‘artistic’, etc.” that it’s often hard to talk about it without falling prey to over-simplification. Like many valuable insights in our culture, this too has been trivialized into “fridge-magnet” slogans and hollow platitudes. Everybody claims to “be aware” of it, yet through a kind of unreflected popularization we often render certain understandings impotent to effect genuine and sustainable development.

### Damaged Goods

Let’s take a look at the mapping of major language centers in the brain for a second. It all started when Pierre Paul Broca, a French physicist discovered that one of his patients who had a severe speech disorder (he couldn’t say anything else than “tan”) suffered from a *lesion* in the left frontal lobe of his brain. Later, the German Karl Wernicke found out that if patients had damages in their brain in a different place, they didn’t have any problems to *produce* speech motorically but they couldn’t *comprehend* what was being said!

Like colonies, the two previously unmapped areas now were called Broca/Wernicke. What do the discoveries of Broca & Wernicke have in common? My professor in neurolinguistics once summarized it as follows: **“If it can be broken, it must have a function.”**

Imagine you are a visitor from the jungle without exposure to modern civilization and one day you stumble over a functioning computer. You want to find out how it works. So you start destroying parts of it. When certain parts of it don’t work anymore you assume that the one that you destroyed must have had this or that function. But since it’s now broken you need to get a new one to confirm this understanding.

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While I don't want to imply that the two physicians actively destroyed parts of patients' brains to acquire an understanding (mostly they looked at autopsies), their (and others') research is often based on observing damage.

Now, if we go back to our jungle man and his computer, he will be able to gain isolated understanding of certain parts but by merely deducing from brokenness he will never gain an understanding of the whole.

### Holistic Approaches to Learning

Our whole education system sits on the premise of “understanding in isolation”. At least in the West, this is how we learn, traditionally. We look at a situation and isolate the problem. Then we “fix it” or try to deduce general rules from this about the whole situation. It has brought us great advances in science, economics, etc. But we might just have reached the end of the ladder.

**In a globalized world, we need global thinking and global understanding**, not just in a geographical sense, but in a psychological one, as well.

What that means for the brain is that however we want to classify all the different parts of it (left/right hemisphere, Broca/Wernicke centers, etc.) merely mapping them is not sufficient. It might help to identify certain problems, localize and maybe find solutions to them, but this approach is only a fracture of what we might call holistic learning.

In other words: **knowledge doesn't always mean understanding. Information doesn't automatically lead to learning.** Here are some examples:

- Many European countries pride themselves on being pluralistic societies and at the same their leaders rant against the lacking “integration” (see also: assimilation) of immigrants.
- Every schoolteacher has learned about the lateralization of brain functions. Yet he almost always falls back on the structuralistic, rigidly linear one, whether out of his own preference or the way the system is built around

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normative evaluation and isolated understanding.

- We are living in the information age. We have an almost infinite access to information about health. Yet, as the [Journal of Nutrition](#) wrote in 2010 “nearly the entire U.S. population consumes a diet that is not on par with recommendations”

### Scatterbrains & Non-Sequential Thinking

If you read a recipe for a cheesecake, the end-point is clearly defined and the whole text only leads to one thing: the cake. The same is true if you have a piece of “opinion politics” where the author from the beginning has a fixed view on things and tries to convince you that *his point* is right. There are many other examples. But the article which you are reading right now, and the rest of my writing, for that matter, has a completely different approach.

While I do have very deliberate outlook from the beginning, I’m not interested in turning the exposition of understanding into an autopsy, which would imply that it (the understanding) is already dead.

In teacher’s training in university we were taught to plan every five minutes of a class. We were supposed to set learning goals for these 5-minute sections, make predictions of how the students will react and then reverse-engineer a lesson-plan which successfully leads to these goals. This rarely works in a classroom, however, because understanding is not a product. It’s a process.

Learning is not about instilling pre-packaged knowledge in someone else’s brain as if installing a software. Unfortunately, this is often the standard approach. Holistic education could be understood as a form of open-ended human development. It’s not a matter of indoctrination or a means of reaching a fixed end-point. In terms of methodology, holistic learning could be such that it draws the learner into a creative process by systemically leaving gaps that cannot be bridged by sequential or pure logical thinking but demand an independent effort from the recipient’s side.

While we are generally aware of “learning through discovery” (just another slogan?), it is by no means at the center of mainstream-education. Instead, we have

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come to expect everything to be pre-packaged, prepared and served to us on a silver platter. Education should be like entertainment, best enjoyed with the least effort. This is not learning, though. This is simply consuming knowledge.

### Switching Attention

A non-sequential approach to teaching for example will often look at the same thing from different angles to encourage lateral thinking or serendipity. By switching attention and looking at a topic from all sides as if we're walking around it we slowly discover a three-dimensional grasp of it, so to speak. It seems to me that many of us have never learned or even thought it worthwhile to use our minds in a more holistic way. On the one hand we have people who are over-structural, over-linear and pedantic in their approaches and on the other hand of the spectrum we have people, often influenced by Far-Eastern methods, who simply believe that "thinking is *bad*".

All of these assumptions can be understood as barriers to learning. Unfortunately, our very ideas of what education is or should be can be the biggest barriers of all.

Whenever we think about the mind these days, we tend to think about the brain. The increasing detail with which science has been able to chart the tiniest areas of this strangest of all human organs has tempted us to believe that even our most intimate dreams, wishes and fears can all be reduced to chemical reactions within the brain. We look for emotional skills in the limbic systems, try to hunt down the mechanics of learning in the cerebral cortex. There's nothing wrong with the scientific method, except its absolutism. Education cannot be reduced to mechanistic principles. Learning always has an element of surprise and wonder. If the process of teaching is viewed as a fixed procedure, learning is impossible.

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## Languages Are Like Friends

There are (at least) two kinds of language learners. One needs to learn a language *in order to* reach a certain goal. This goal may be anything from getting a visa, writing an application to communicating to your aunt from over-seas. The other group learns a language seemingly without any apparent goal. But are they the weaker learners?

The simple answer is that having a goal and a certain time framework surely will help going through the process quicker. But there's also the danger of going through the motions without actually internalizing any of it, or forgetting vocabulary quickly.

### Speed-Reading Shakespeare

Speed reading is a method that promises to let people read quicker in order to reach a goal (finishing book, writing paper, preparing presentation, etc) faster.

Whereas a purely informational book about science, economics, etc may be enjoyed more by reading it quicker (thus decreasing boredom and fatigue) if you read a novel or poem by the classic authors **increased speed does not necessarily mean increased learning**. In fact, you might miss a lot of important nuances if you don't slow down.

The former example is like the group of learners that want to reach a goal as quickly as possible. The latter is like the group of people who don't seem to have a concrete goal but a huge interest.

Both are valid approaches. There's a plethora of blogs and books that talk about the important of "goal setting", and while it surely can be helpful to calibrate one's goals in life once in a while, I wonder if it's also possible to be too goal-oriented.

### Mountain Climbing as Process

If we split everything in life into "process" and "goals", there's a lot more of the former than the latter. While we do reach goals sometimes, most of the time we

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find ourselves on the long and winding road of the process. It might be a cliché that “The Path Is the Goal” but in a mainly goal-oriented society the downside is that if we don’t constantly set new goals, we begin to feel useless.

This is why – as a language teacher – I believe that the first and most important aspect of learning a language is to relax into the process. If you are rushing ahead to your goal you might get there quicker but you might also miss the beautiful scenery along the way and the deep experiences of cross-cultural understanding that can unfold from decelerated learning.

### **A Friend for Life**

Whereas goal-oriented language learning may be the seemingly quickest way to the top, process-oriented language learning is actually the deepest. To me, learning a language is like getting to know a friend or your spouse. In essence, it never ends. There are always new things to discover, misunderstandings to be clarified, surprises to be made, etc.

So, again – if your life or job doesn’t depend on it, this is an invitation to relax.

Take your time and start dancing with the language you are learning. Again, it’s like in a relationship: sometimes it’s tango, sometimes waltz .. and sometimes the flailing and wailing of lovers locked in combat.

We have to be careful not to over-estimate principles of efficiency. It may seem cool and flashy to accelerate things on the surface. But actually it’s an achingly over-rated principle. What works for factories and businesses does **not** work for relationships. Obvious, isn’t it?

**Learning a language is not a conveyor belt activity. It’s about maintaining and sustaining relationships.**

In this respect the relation to a language and the people it allows you to connect to are one and the same.

At the time when I wrote this article I found myself stumbling over a lot of blog posts with titles like “how to master German in 3 days” and other ludicrous

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promises. Even now, if you start googling for language learning products, there's an endless array of methods (with the obligatory trademark) or secret "hacks" how to learn languages faster and faster, as if it's some kind of competition. This article, written in a similar style like the articles it criticizes, was an attempt to explore different concepts of language learning in very general terms. While I still believe that learning a language never stops, I have to admit however that there are circumstances where people need to learn a language fast, just to get by. And if these "methods" really help, then that's great. To me they still seem like cheap marketing ploys.

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## Information Junkies

In a Wall Street Journal article titled [“Why We’re Powerless To Resist Grazing On Endless Web Data”](#) its author uses the metaphor of a cat hunting for the red dot produced by a laser pointer to illustrate how human beings hunt for information.

In the same way the cat does not realize the dot can never be caught, the information addict keeps on browsing websites without ever reaching a stop. The article quotes a neuroscientist from the University of Southern California saying **“When you find new information, you get an opioid hit, and we are junkies for those. You might call us ‘infovores.’”**

He also quotes a study where pictures that were prompting the viewers to interpret or make sense of them, received more attention from the test persons than pictures with unambiguous content.

It’s a common understanding that the brain creates meaning and connections between seemingly unrelated, random things. It is called apophenia, “the experience of seeing meaningful patterns or connections in random or meaningless data.”

Most of us have had an experience of apophenia more than once, like when you listen to music on your headphones and passengers and cars seem to be moving rhythmically to a soundtrack only you can hear. Superstitious practices such as coffee reading are also related to apophenia, of course.

So the brain prefers information where there’s a lot of data to “fill in”. **This is the stuff that gets it hooked.** Advertisement campaigns and Internet memes are a good example of how this works.

In the times of magazines, the information junkie had quickly reached the point where the information was exhausted. And during the TV-era, even with 200+ channels, he eventually reached a point of over-saturation where there was nothing interesting enough to keep watching.

To the great joy of our grazing brains, the Internet has changed all that. If you know where to find the good stuff, you can feed your neurons with highly targeted

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and focused material until they curl up and shut down. Instead of the information running out and our brains having to actually process it in a deeper way, we now can simply keep on grazing until the brain's batteries run out in an ocean of infinite stimuli.

On the one hand, we don't have long-term studies that show what many years of information addiction does to a person's brain. Does it increase brain-activity by stimulating neuronal "muscles"? Or does it wear out our brains if they're constantly processing stuff?

In the same way our society has largely accepted addictions to TV, shopping and food, information addiction is also becoming part of the norm. Whether you need to stay in touch with your high school friends, be informed about politics or stay up to date on research, modern life almost puts you at a *disadvantage* if you are not inclined towards information addiction.

In fact, much of what we call education is built on an excessive intake of information. Far from being a pathology it's the stuff a scholar's medals are made of.

But habitually hunting down information for information's sake can become a real problem, leading to **constant distraction and mental fuzziness**. Doing this in a targeted way, with an intention and goal of benefiting others and sharing hopefully ground-breaking insights with the public, obviously is a different story.

The problem is that the two are getting harder and harder to separate. There are people claiming to do important research, yet they are mainly interested in maintaining their data habits. On the other hand there are people who are highly creative and productive despite these habits.

It's not just the intention that makes the difference. There is learning, and then there's conditioning we *call* "learning".

Like many of my articles about Internet related distraction, this too was a result of directly observing what happened to my friends and myself as we scoured the infinite depths of the world wide web, day after day after day. The way the article is

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written implies that I myself was already suffering from this 'mental fuzziness' I was trying to describe. Looking at teenagers and children interact with technology we can already see how they are adapting to the new situation in terms of [behavior and skills](#).

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# Appendix



## Links, Tools & Resources

If you need help with any of the technical details, do a quick search. You'll find that especially regarding open-source tools, there are tons of helpful documentation and conversations out there, just a click away.

### *Search Engine Optimization*

- [Google Keyword Tool \[link\]](#)

researching keywords and phrases

- [Search Engine Land \[link\]](#)

great resource for anything SEO

### *Scheduling*

- [Google Calendar \[link\]](#)

easy way to keep track of schedules

- [Tungle \[link\]](#)

an app designed to handle meetings

### *The Session*

- [Skype \[link\]](#)

free voice/video conversation, low cost global phone call

- [PowerGrama \[link\]](#)

record Skype calls and play MP3s into the conversation

- [Conceptboard \[link\]](#)

a great whiteboard application

- [Google Documents \[link\]](#)

tools for real-time collaboration

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**Links, Tools  
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- [QuieTube \[link\]](#)

using YouTube videos without distractions

### ***Handling Payments***

- [PayPal \[link\]](#)

fast & secure international payment provider

- [Moneybookers \[link\]](#)

similar like PayPal, not as widely used, but accepted in more countries

### ***Creating Materials***

- [Open Office \[link\]](#)

an open-source alternative to Microsoft Office or iWork

- [Google Documents \[link\]](#)

create, edit, share documents collaboratively

- [Audacity \[link\]](#)

open-source solution for recording and editing audio material

### ***Your Own Website***

- [Wordpress \[link\]](#)

an open-source solution to blogs and websites

- [Independent Teachers Directory \[link\]](#)

list your personal teaching website for free

### ***Blogs & Websites by Edupreneurs***

- [kirstenwinkler.com](#)
- [edukwest.com](#)

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- [myeslfriends.com](http://myeslfriends.com)
- [ESL brain](http://ESLbrain.com)
- [Collo And Spark](http://ColloAndSpark.com)

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## Acknowledgments

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André Klein, June 2012

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*This book is an independent production. Did you find any typos or broken links? Send an email to the author at [andre@learnoutlive.com](mailto:andre@learnoutlive.com) and if your suggestion makes it into the next edition, your name will be listed, here.*

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Acknowledgments

## About the author:

André Klein was born in Germany, has grown up and lived in many different places including Thailand, Sweden and Israel. He has produced two music albums, performed and organized literary readings, curated an experimental television program and is the author of various short stories and non-fiction works.

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*About the  
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## Further Reading



### **OMG! Not Yet Another Book About Blogging!**

Do you remember the days when a mere mention of the word “blog” would split a room in two?

Within a second you could have the nerds and technologically informed silently nodding to themselves and rolling their eyes while the uninitiated blurted out: “HUH? WHAT? A BLOB?!”

Then, unavoidable as the Amen in church, the geeky litany was unrolled: that the word blog was actually a blend of “web-log” and usually referred to a collection of entries in reverse-chronological which could theoretically consist of text, audio, video and allowed interactivity in the form of comments.

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Today, nobody talks like that anymore.

Every child knows what a blog is. Every groundskeeper and aunt from overseas has stumbled over one, before.

And yet, whenever the word blog is mentioned in newspapers and television programs, it is still often treated as if there were invisible quotation marks around it. As if blogs were part of some deeply obscure and terribly unpredictable underworld that were at best approached with caution, at worst avoided as mere swamps of disinformation.

And, to give them some credit: there are these blogs full of political rants, biased to the brim, their contents almost as outrageous as their bad spelling.

Then again, they are just one example of blogging and are in no way representative of the whole spectrum of blogging.

In the same way Victorian poetry and a clumsily translated vacuum-cleaner manual have not much more in common than being made up of words, also the functions, aesthetics and contents of various blogs can be like day and night.

This book is about one particular approach to blogging, one which I'm fond of calling: The Third Kind (Don't worry, it doesn't involve making mountain-shaped models of mud or going on an unpaid alien abduct..., mer... holiday.)

This particular approach can be described as follows: building blogs as an attention-infrastructure.

It sounds a bit abstract, doesn't it?

Here are some practical aspects of what an attention-infrastructure can do for you:

- stir up a buzz around your band, brand or business

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- attract more customers, fans, sales or sign-ups
- build a reputation
- pave the way for world-domination...

The best about this is that while a consistent blogging campaign can generate the same results (or higher) than an advertising campaign it doesn't cost anything and it's not even felt as advertising, because it's more like a free sample than a coupon.

Now, obviously there are a lot of books and other forms of advice about blogging that promise to get you a such and such figure income per year, etc.

And while, at least on the technical side, they aren't all wrong, blogging for financial gains is a complete understatement of what a blog can do! This doesn't mean that a blog can't also help businesses and individuals make money. A third kind approach to blogging will and should certainly and unmistakably help to ramp up the bacon, so you can focus on other things.

But blogging for dough is like being satisfied with fool's gold.

The third kind approach to blogging starts where other approaches stop.

It does not just bring quick sales today but has the potential to put anyone's business on a trajectory of growth and inevitable success in the long haul, if subjected to the right pressure, commitment and quality.

In this book you'll find out how to:

- get a professional blog up and running without any programming experience
- crank out writing that will bring your band, brand or business attention
- build mailing-lists that build themselves
- create buttons and links that actually get clicked
- write irresistible headlines
- come up with a writing schedule that you (and your readers) can actually follow

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- use Social Media to make your blog go viral without wasting time and effort
- keep writing when the going gets tough
- capitalize on feedback without falling prey to statistics
- get professional photos for free
- create articles that sell
- and much more...

available as:

- [INDIE-PUBLISHING PACK](#)
- [KINDLE VERSION](#)

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