

Webucator Self-paced eLearning Review
PHP and MySQL series from Web Development training
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The At-Your-Own-Pace online courses are the least expensive training option offered by Webucator, each series costing \$99.95 or less. Courses are offered in packages or series, and when you buy a series you have access to all the courses in that series for a full year. I really like the full year access combined with the at-your-own-pace style—I have certain times of the year when I'm really busy, and find it difficult to make time to even finish reading a book. I can access the course at work on lunchtime, or at home—wherever and whenever I happen to have some spare time.

I chose the PHP and MySQL series from Web Development training. This series consists of 15 courses for a total of 43 hours. The courses cover topics such as Installing Required Software, PHP basics, SQL and MySQL, Cookies & sessions, Web Application Security, and Developing Web Applications. The last three courses cover Content Management, User Registration, and E-commerce.

Before beginning a course, you have the option to either begin the course, or take a skills assessment test before choosing which course topics to focus on. You can take the assessment test after each course to measure your progress. You can also retake the courses as often as you like. This comes in handy when I've been away from a course too long, and need to refresh my memory!

There are tabs visible on the left hand side throughout the courses, which you can access at any time. These include Course Topics, Course Tools, Search the Course, and Help. In Course Tools, you find the assessment tests, you can view your scores, view progress reports, and view scores for each course in the series. There is a print button located on each screen if you prefer to print your lessons, but you can also print all the exercises within a topic from the Course Tools tab. You can view course content information, and also request Continuing Education Units (CEUs) for each course.

Each course is divided into several sections, each containing the lesson, questions, and a short summary of what you have just learned. Some sections also have simulations, exercises, and/or activities. I like the simulations. The MySQL installation section, for example, shows screen shots which you click through, and simulates installing the MySQL server on a Windows machine. At the end of each course, there is a Course in Review section, which reviews the material presented in the course through questions and activities. At the end of the review lesson, you can check your scores to see which lessons you need to retake (if any), take a skill assessment to achieve mastery, and send an evaluation with comments or suggestions for the course.

For the first section in the PHP and MySQL course, it presents the installation of MySQL on Windows XP, but also offers installation instructions for Mac users. It notes that the procedures and practices in the course assume the use of Windows operating system, and states that use of other operating systems may result in conflicts between MySQL, Apache and PHP. That being said, it does use/teach Apache rather than Microsoft's web servers. Within the lessons, there are tips regarding the software (for example, it explains that Apache version 2 has some issues with PHP, and that Apache 1 can be less

complicated to use). After each installation presentation, it offers a link to view instructions for installation on Macs.

The first course covers installation of the required software: MySQL, Apache and PHP, how to configure the installations, setting the root password, and creating users, then assigning access permissions to those users. The second course, PHP Basics, covers PHP syntax, how to write basic php scripts, and applying variables, strings, and constants. I had very little experience with PHP scripts, so this section was very useful to me.

Once you learn the PHP basics, you move on to Programming with PHP. This course covers HTML forms using PHP scripts, validating form data, and creating scripts using arrays and conditionals.

Creating Dynamic Web Sites is the next course, which covers more advanced scripting, creating and calling functions. Next we move on to SQL and MySQL, creating and working with databases, and retrieving data using SQL/MySQL. After the basics, Advanced SQL/MySQL delves further into databases, discussing database normalization, creating and searching databases, then creating indexes to optimize the database. Error Handling and Debugging is the next course, where you learn how to identify error types, debug errors, and create custom error handlers.

Next, using the PHP learned earlier, we learn how to use PHP in conjunction with MySQL databases. Developing Web Applications covers more advanced topics in creating applications: working with server settings, editing records, making sortable displays, and using HTTP headers. A course using Cookies and Sessions comes next.

A very interesting and useful course is Web Application Security. It covers Preventing multiple sessions, form validation, validating data, regular expressions, Database security and encryption, and Secure salt storage.

The course Extended topics covers file uploads, uploading PHP files, creating Javascript, output buffering, new MySQL features, and using PEAR (PHP Extension and Application Repository) for reusable PHP components.

The last three courses are "Example" courses: a Content management example, building a sample content management site using PHP/database; User registration; and an E-commerce example.

I haven't finished my PHP/MySQL series yet, but so far, I am finding it a very useful and cost-effective alternative to classroom courses. I really like the at-your-own-pace style-- with classroom situations, the pace can either be too fast, and I get lost, or too slow, and I get bored. This online course makes the pace just right. And, I'm looking forward to taking other Webucator courses in the future, as they are very affordable.