

Hustle & Grace with Hilary Sutton, Season 1, Episode 13

Melissa Guller, Online Entrepreneurship Expert on How to Monetize Your Expertise and Self-Awareness

Hilary Sutton: I'm so excited to welcome Melissa Guller to the podcast today. By day, Melissa is the Head of Special Projects at Teachable, an online tool that allows anyone to create and sell their own online courses, and ever since she launched her first side hustle in 2015, Melissa has been hooked on online entrepreneurship and empowering people to go for their big, awesome dreams. A bit of a side hustle queen herself, Melissa has been a top-rated instructor at General Assembly NYC for over two years, and she has over 1300 students currently enrolled in her Skillshare course "What Great Managers Do Differently". Most recently, Melissa founded "The Kindling", a community for millennial women building online businesses, blogs, and podcasts they love.

Welcome, Melissa! I'm so glad to have you on Hustle & Grace!

Melissa Guller: Thank you so much for having me!

HS: Thrilled! I'd love to start off our conversation exploring your experience in the online course space. A lot of our listeners are familiar with online education in the sense that you can go back and get a degree online. I think a lot of people have no idea how prevalent online courses are and that exploration on your own of furthering your education in your work. Tell us a little bit about Teachable, Skillshare and that booming online education space.

MG: I'd love to. So right now, one of the best parts about the Internet is that I think a lot of people are familiar with ecommerce, where you can sell products online, but today you can also sell knowledge online. There is this whole knowledge commerce industry, where you can share your expertise in something in exchange for an income. The company I work for, Teachable, our whole mission is to empower creators to transform that knowledge into income. With Teachable you can create your own online courses through your own business and website, and then the way you would use Skillshare or Wordpress to build a website, you can use Teachable to build your own online courses. I love what we do – it's the mission that drove me to the company. We support, I believe around tens of thousands of customers now who are creating their own online courses in anything, from watercolor painting to card magic to marketing to flying drones. That's the other myth I want to bust – there are a lot of technical skills I think people think you can learn online, like coding, user experience design, web development, but you can really learn anything online these days, which is great both for consumers because you can learn how to bake or do anything artistic, and you can also teach. This world of the education technology industry is fairly new still. Like you said Hilary, I don't think many people know about it. It's very empowering both that you can learn and teach anything online. That's what I do working for Teachable, I empower more people to teach. I also actually have online courses. Skillshare is a great example of a company that houses online courses. While Teachable empowers the instructor to create and sell their own expertise, websites like Skillshare, Udemy, are marketplaces of courses where students can go to those websites to find courses. That's the big difference. Teachable is a tool for creators, while Skillshare is a marketplace for students.

HS: Got it! I wasn't sure what the difference was – that makes total sense. One of my passions is empowering young creatives to find unique ways to use the Internet to make side hustles happen. For example, if they're actors, they don't have to wait tables or work retail. We live in a world now where you can monetize your expertise. You're saying with Teachable or Skillshare, someone who is a music major can teach a voice lesson.

MG: Absolutely! At Teachable we actually have quite a few music instructors and songwriters that are turning that knowledge into income in a much different way than people in the music industry have been able to in the past. It's so nice because if you think about yourself as a musician or creator, not only do you have the gift of creating your art, but you also have the gift to teach others how to start up that art on their own. I would say a major difference, if people are trying to decide "what's the right way for me to share my knowledge online", there is "online course world", which is where most of my expertise lies, and a major difference between Teachable and Skillshare is that with Skillshare, as an instructor I contribute my knowledge to a wide marketplace of options and I get a small cut of my course and what it earns. I am a Skillshare instructor, I was doing that before I worked at Teachable, and I earn money based on how much my students watch my course on their site. It's not too much, I will be honest with you, but the pro of Skillshare is that my audience, my reach, is much larger. With Teachable, if I sell a course on how to write a song or play the guitar, let's pretend it's 100 dollars, I as the instructor get to keep that money other than maybe a credit card processing fee. That's a significant difference, where I would just be keeping the list price, compared to Skillshare where I'm getting paid a little bit of dollars and cents per minute watched. So if you're brand new and trying to grow a name for yourself, maybe Skillshare or Udemy is right for you, but if you're trying to monetize something and earn an income, Teachable is the right option for you.

HS: It's almost the difference in publishing, between going with a traditional publisher where they take a big cut of every time you sell a book, or to do the self-publishing route, where if you've been working and building a platform all along, then you can sell that product on your website and earn a lot more.

MG: Exactly. And having it on your website is the key distinguishing factor. The Teachable course is just the tool. The course is through your site, we just take care of your logistics so that you can be creating. With Skillshare, I built my course on their website.

I also want to add that online courses are just one way that you can share your knowledge in exchange for money. Some other ways might include eBooks, which may be the easiest to create, and also things like coaching, freelancing and selling your services. The knowledge commerce industry is really broad, and Teachable's overall mission isn't just to be in the online course space, although that's what we focus now. Our goal is to empower people broader to share any of their knowledge in any of those methods online.

HS: Very cool. I think it's easy for anyone, not even just a creative, but anyone who has expertise, to just assume "oh, everyone knows that". But the truth is that there are people who will exchange money for your knowledge, whatever it might be, especially if it's something unique in the creative or arts space, where not everyone went and got a music degree or a theater degree or whatever. I think it's a really great opportunity for people.

MG: I think there are two big misconceptions where people feel like they don't have enough expertise to teach (that's the big one), like "I'm not the number one in my field" or "I don't have

tons of accreditation”. But the truth is all you have to do is be one step ahead of your student or audience, and you’re perfectly qualified to teach. So that’s big myth number one: you don’t have to be the predominant name in your field, you just have to be a little bit ahead. The second myth that most people don’t realize is they’ll say “you could Google it” or “someone could find a YouTube video” or that someone could find this information on their own. The fact is, people are more than willing to pay you because you’re offering a shortcut. You’ve done this before. They want to know exactly how you achieved your outcome. When you think about an online course – people are not buying the stuff that says “how to”. They’re not buying how many videos you have, they’re not buying any of that. They are buying a transformation. They don’t want to give you an example. They don’t want to know they should be going to the gym. They want to know that you have a six pack, and that’s what they want. They want the end result – they want the six pack! They want to know how to knit a blanket. They want to know how to fly a drone. They are more than willing to pay you because you figured out how to do that. Your knowledge has probably a higher price tag than you even realize because people want to know exactly what you did to achieve the result that they want.

HS: Because you kind of are the case study because it’s worked for you.

MG: You’ve done the Googling, you’ve done the free YouTube watching, you’ve probably watched a lot of things and read a lot of things that were helpful and were not helpful. You’ve sifted through all of that, and now you have the shortcut. Your course is the best, fastest route to the outcome that they want for themselves as well. So people are so, so willing to pay for that.

HS: That makes so much sense! Tell me a little bit more about your story. How did you get started creating your first course online? How did you get the idea? How were you exposed to that? Can you share a little bit about that with us?

MG: Yes, I would love to! So I used to work full time for General Assembly. The mission of their company is to give people the opportunity to find jobs in modern work forces with modern skills. They acknowledge that universities and degrees, that method is outdated at times. Their example going into it I believe in either 2009 or 2011 (I don’t remember the year) is something like web development. It wasn’t really being taught in university settings. There were computer science degrees, but a lot of the skills needed for startups and user experience design isn’t really taught in a university. They believed you could learn it in 12 weeks and find a job. So they started off as a boot camp setting, but now they have classes in everything from technology, business and design. So when I was working there full time, that’s when I first realized that there was this entire world of sharing knowledge that was not university, that was not what we were taught in school. That really resonated with me. My first experience teaching was not online, it was in person. Although I was working at General Assembly full time, they also asked if I would teach in person Excel classes. I love Excel. I’m a huge nerd, and I love a good spreadsheet. True confessions: I’m addicted to Excel! I had actually taught in previous full time roles. I had done internal trainings before, and I think the teacher position is just something I’ve always naturally fallen into, where coworkers would say “hey, how do you do that?” and I would take the time to explain it to them. I had put together corporate trainings before, so putting together an Excel curriculum felt natural to me. But I did take a lot of adult learning theory courses, and I think this is important to note. A major difference between adult learners and kids is that adults are choosing to learn. Kids have to go to school! That’s just the way parents have chosen to bring their kids up in this world. But adults choose to be in the classroom, and that means that their motivation is much different and the way they learn is much different. I always start with

objectives: why am I teaching excel? What are the things I want students to be able to do, define, create by the end of the course? And then I put together a curriculum based on those objectives. So teaching in person really laid a foundation for me, and I was teaching in person for a few years. People would come to my class and ask me if I was doing any consulting or tutoring, so I started doing those as well. The online opportunity came up because Skillshare recruited me. They found that I had been teaching in person Excel, Squarespace and management courses at General Assembly, and they asked me if I would contribute to their site because they were trying to build out their business vertical. Skillshare started out mostly for creatives, but they asked me to do this management course, so I built out a management course about what great managers do differently, and things just kind of built from there. I'm a big proponent of saying yes when things come up, so I've been fortunate that by hustling, my name has gotten out there a little bit. Teachable found me because of General Assembly, with my skill course and working for my former employer who sold online courses, so that's kind of how my career has fit together and how I started teaching online as well.

HS: Cool! A lot of it has been saying yes to an opportunity and walking through the next open door, in a nutshell. If I'm a person who has a few different skills and I'm starting to realize that these are monetizable, but I don't really have experience in online entrepreneurship space, what are your tips for people who would like to launch that side hustle of monetizing their expertise? Are there books we should read or a course we should take? What are your recommendations?

MG: I will first make a shameless plug for Teachable because I do work here and I think the product is excellent, but beyond the tool itself to build the courses, we actually have an entire training program called Teachable You, where we guide new course creators through how to choose the right topic, how to build an audience, how to create a course, including how to DIY video at home and create the workbooks and how to outline your course before you launch it. So I do have to make a shameless plug that I believe Teachable is wonderful. I wouldn't work here if I didn't think it was excellent. But in terms of how to turn your knowledge into a course, I would say the biggest tip is just thinking about your outcome. So instead of thinking about a course as a series of skills to teach somebody, think about why you're teaching this course. What will they be able to do at the end that they can't do now? So again with the going to the gym example. You're not really teaching people how to do the reps, how to eat healthy – you're not teaching them any of that. Your ultimate goal is for them to either live a healthier life, to have a six pack, to have a certain body type – that's the outcome of the course. So I say before you go out into the world and you teach, think about what the transformation is that you're hoping to impart by the end of your course. Something more tangible if you want to learn how to teach is that there are some great resources about adult learning theory, but I would also recommend maybe starting to do some coaching or one on one interactions with your skill. People will give you really great feedback and you can turn that into a course as well. So I would say try to take individuals through an experience first before you build a course, that could be really beneficial for you.

HS: That's a great idea. So beyond your side hustle work, online courses, Teachable, Skillshare, you have also done a really great job of navigating the first chunk of your career. I think I heard on your podcast and also on Instagram you talking about how negotiation has been important for you in your career, how you have increased your income over the last few years. Can you tell us a little bit about that and what you've learned in the first chunk of your career about that.

MG: I love talking about this! I think this has been true throughout both the career and the side hustling, but I want to encourage more people to ask for what they want and to maybe try to set aside the fear of rejection. I managed to move up in my career fairly quickly by working with my boss, or any boss I had, to partner on how I could move up. So I'll give you some examples. I actually started my career as a production assistant at an event production company. We produced large corporate events, and when I was first in the position I would always ask my boss "what can I do to help you?" and when review time was coming up, I would say things like "I would love to be considered for a production coordinator role (a step up) in three months when reviews come around. What can I make sure to accomplish now in order for that to make sense in a few months?" So that's really the biggest tip is not only am I asking, but I am asking in advance. When I had those kinds of conversations with my boss, she would lay out that a production coordinator should be able to do XYZ skills, and then I would make it my mission over the next three months to make sure I had done those things. So when it came time for my review for a title or a salary increase, I had exactly her expectations and I had already met them. I had given her only reasons to say yes. That's been a huge help for me, because I think it's tough to come into the meeting and say "I think I deserve a raise or promotion", unless you worked together in advance, it is going to feel abrupt. But if you approach it a few months in advance, you'll both be on the same page. Your boss really does want to champion you. I can say that now that I've been a manager. Your boss wants you to do well, but they need the evidence and the support to go to their boss and argue for your raise or promotion. Two things I would recommend: asking in advance but also keeping a log of your accomplishments, so when the time comes that you go into the room you can advocate and say "here are some things I've done for the company, which include launching this major initiative or increasing sales from x to y or helping customers better use our product in these ways". So anytime your coworkers say nice things about you tuck those away in a safe place, or if you get really good feedback or a project goes well, save that info. The way that I think about things now as a manager is that I'm always noticing when people make my life easier. You want to be able to show that you're making your boss's life easier by doing something great for the company. The thing that you shouldn't do, to give a counterexample, is you don't want to talk about the fact that your rent is going up, because your rent going up doesn't affect the company. It is a bit of a harsh reality, but the truth is that if you're advocating for a raise or a promotion, you should be able to support that by showing what great work you've been doing. Always keep a log of what you've been doing, but also ask regularly. I asked for a raise every six months. Even if the answer was no, that was fine, I would say "Great, I understand. What can I do over the next six months to work towards the kind of raise we're talking about now?"

HS: It's demystifying. I think a lot of people think annual reviews are stupid and poorly done, but the truth is that you don't have to wait for your supervisor to tell you what needs to change or how you need to grow – you can go to them in advance. The subordinate has more control of the situation than you sometimes feel, because you can go to someone in advance and say "hey, can you give me some bullet points of what I need to accomplish in order to get the result at my three months review that I'm hoping for." I think that's great advice.

MG: Absolutely! I love to think about your career as the business of you. You are the only person responsible for making sure the business of you is successful. That might mean talking with your boss. Think about how busy your boss is, and how much of a relief it is if you come in with all the information and you're fully prepared. It's like a presentation, the way that you would

present a project for the company, you want to equip them to feel prepared to give you that raise or promotion, and they're not going to do the work for you. That's on you fully. On the other hand there will be times that you outgrow the company where you are. Another major part of increasing my salary but more importantly increasing my responsibilities and my roles in companies, there unfortunately are times that I have had to leave because the company couldn't offer me the kind of responsibility and role that I was looking for. My first role that I mentioned was at a production company, and I had such a wonderful experience working there. The people were great, my boss of that company was such a champion for all the people on her team and I learned so much from her. But there came a time where I realized I didn't necessarily want to move up in event production, and the company didn't have the kind of leadership and management position I was looking for. So after two and a half years I had to seek outside opportunities. Sometimes you have to make the decision that what's best for the business of you is a different opportunity, and I've been able to increase my salary pretty significantly by not moving laterally but by moving up. So sometimes you have to make hard choices. I would not say that you should make the decision to leave just for money though. I left because I wanted to do more and to contribute in a more high level capacity. I never left just because I was underpaid. I think that's an important distinction too.

HS: Absolutely.

MG: Like I said though, if you are underpaid and someone else is willing to pay you more for the role, you should entertain that option. You don't owe anything to the company you're at.

HS: I think I've read that people who tend to really have a lot of financial growth or salary growth in a short amount of time is usually because they're moving on to another company. It's a slower progression staying in the same company. Would you say that was true for you or was it more of a mix?

MG: Yeah, absolutely. If I hadn't switched jobs, I would not have been able to triple my salary in just three years the way that I did. To be clear, my original PA salary was quite low. But you've gotta start somewhere! It was only by moving into other companies and other higher positions that I was able to do something like that. I could never have done that if I were staying with one company.

HS: Totally. It's a good reminder, especially in the early part of your career, not to get too comfortable anywhere and to take chances on new opportunities because that's a great time to go from early career to mid-level management. I would say in those first five to seven years of your career is a great time to do that. And then in a few years you'll be a vice president and you'll be rockin' it and you'll be awesome!

MG: Exactly! And I will say that even if you aren't looking, this sounds basic, but make sure your LinkedIn is updated because a lot of my opportunities, including Teachable, have come via outreach and me being recruited. You won't always be looking for opportunities, which is fine, but just make sure your online professional presence is updated, because you never know what kind of opportunity you might want to say yes to.

HS: I can totally vouch for that too. I currently have about five consistent freelance clients, and my main anchor client came from LinkedIn – they reached out to me. Another big client that I have is a connection I made when I moved to DC and I was looking for

new opportunities, I started reaching out to people who were alumni of my alma mater who were in a similar field (she was a marketing director). I just said “hey, we came from the same place, if you ever know of anyone who needs a freelance content writer please point them my way”. I wasn’t specifically asking her for work, and I think it was five months later she came to me with a year-long contract ready to go.

MG: That’s amazing.

HS: I think so many people don’t maximize the opportunity of LinkedIn – I think it’s a really great one. So, last question for you – you can’t be all hustle and no grace. You’re not just hustling at work all the time. What do you do to bring balance to your life? What do you do for inspiration and refreshment?

MG: I think this is such an important question because I do work my full time job at Teachable which I love, and I’ve now launched this community The Kindling on the side, which is a lot of hustle going on in my life right now. I think it’s important to create time to relax. This is not a very chill answer, but I treat my social life almost like a side hustle. By that I mean on Sundays I proactively plan out which friends I haven’t seen and determine which friends I haven’t reached out to, and then I make sure I carve out time to see my friends and call my parents and my sisters throughout the week and I treat them like nonnegotiable. I had this a-ha moment where I was looking at my calendar a few weeks ago and I realized the only things on my calendar were things other people had asked of me. Things like meetings, meeting up with acquaintances that happened to reach out, and I realized I wanted to make sure things on my calendar were for me. I’m trying to get better about making sure I schedule time for my friends, making time for my family because my family lives far away, they don’t live near me, I’m in Brooklyn. Getting those on my calendar was important. Also, things like reading. I would just block off time to say, “this is a day on Sunday where I’m not going to make plans with anybody, even if they ask”. I started declining plans even with friends I cared about in favor of going having a morning to myself to go to a local coffee shop and read because that is something that is important to me. It’s important to treat your calendar as something that is for you and something for you to proactively put things on, and a plan with yourself is as real as a plan with somebody else. That’s been a big way I find the space.

I’ll also say something that’s helped me remember what I enjoy doing when I want to relax. I have a list of things to do when I have “me time”. I really enjoy reading, I have a keyboard in my apartment, I enjoy playing music – that’s on the list, or other things like getting a manicure to treat myself (I don’t do that very often). I’ll go try a new restaurant in my neighborhood, I’ll try a new brunch spot by myself, I’ll go grab coffee, and I have this ongoing list of things I enjoy doing. I have this adult coloring book that has hilarious sarcastic phrases, and sometimes I’ll just light a candle and put music on and color. That sounds ridiculous to say out loud and I don’t think I’ve ever voiced that on a public platform so hello listeners! But it does make me feel relaxed, and it sounds odd to say I forget about doing it at times. But having this dedicated list of things that I like to do to relax, and then I can skim through and think about what I’m in the mood for. Cooking is another one, I love to cook. I’ll reference that list when I’m feeling bored, because to me boredom is kind of an immediate moment and it’s a defaulting to “oh I should be working on The Kindling” or “I should be writing a blog post” or “I should be finding more women to speak to”. Instead I’m trying to default to “what can I do from my relax list that could be an enjoyable way for me to spend the morning?”

HS: I love that – a relax list! It’s nice too because when you do have some time you don’t have to expend the energy on figuring out “what is it I would want to do?” You can thank your past self for making that list, and you can go and choose something from it. I think it’s so important like you said, our calendars are our own, it’s our own time. We’re so intentional with our work days, but I know for me if I have a Saturday and I have two or three things to get done and I don’t plug it into specific time on my calendar, it takes me all day, whatever activity shrinks or expands the time it takes to do it. I think when I have a specific time dedicated to something, I can get more done and enjoy the time more.

MG: Yeah, absolutely. I find that things take up the space that you give them. So with physical space, I find as I move into apartments that the things that I own naturally take up the size of space that I have. Also in terms of time, if you don’t give your work a bound, like a start and an end time, you will just keep going. Especially for anybody working on a side hustle or growing their own business, it’s tough because the output you give your business is exactly the size of the business itself, so it’s hard to feel like you shouldn’t always be doing more. You have to give yourself permission to stop and say I’m going to work on this for exactly this hour today. On my calendar I have set hours, usually in the mornings, where I say this is the hour today where I’m going to work on my own business. And then after work that day, even if I don’t have anything scheduled, I do not continue working. So I am intentional about when I am working, but also when I’m not working.

HS: So just assigning those hours to something.

MG: Exactly. And I know you’re big on the time blocking, right? You’ve been trying that out?

HS: Oh yeah. I’m learning that when I do give myself less time to do something I can magically get it done in that amount of time!

MG: Isn’t that funny? Things take up the time or the space you give them.

HS: Absolutely. I think it was in my third episode when I interviewed Jeff Goins and he told me he had been experimenting with 90 minute blocks, just not checking email or having notifications, but getting things done in 90 minute segments. I’ve been trying that and it’s been incredible how productive it’s been – it’s a good amount of time for me. In the past I’ve done the Pomodoro technique with the 25 minute increments, but sometimes I might start off needing that 25 minute increment to get started, but then once I get start I might not want to stop after 25 minutes. So 90 minutes is better for me. You said one other thing about sometimes blocking off a Sunday morning to go to a coffee shop and read and maybe even saying no to someone else’s request of your time. It’s clear to me that you know alone time energizes you and you’re probably a little bit of an introvert in that way. It sounds like self-awareness is a huge piece of this – knowing what you need to stay energized and avoid burnout. Would you say that’s true?

MG: Definitely. I think it’s important that you pointed out too that I would say what energizes me is having that time alone, but I have friends that are very extraverted, and that might not necessarily be what energizes them. I think the most important takeaway is to know what you need for yourself and give yourself time for it.

HS: Know what you need. That's so great. So Melissa, where can people find you on the interwebs?

MG: Yes! So the best place to find me is jointhekindling.com – that's my community for women and building online businesses, blogs and podcasts. You can also catch me on Instagram @melissaguller, where I finally figured out how to use Instagram stories and I'm just trying to keep myself relevant.

HS: Haha! That is awesome. Thank you so much Melissa, this was such an incredible conversation and I know that our listeners are going to love checking out your website and following you on Instagram.

MG: Yeah, this has been such a pleasure. I hope they reach out if there is anything I can do for them. Thanks Hilary!