

Notes from Rome

A room full of language teaching businesses, and what's actually working right now

June 2026

Great two days with a room full of language teaching creators and course businesses, a few of us from this group among them. Expected a lot of hand-wringing about AI. Got the opposite: people quietly proving that the human side of this work is more valuable than ever. Here are the ideas that stuck with me, in case they're useful for yours.

THE BIG SHIFT

AI and the human moat

AI IS A TOOL, NOT THE THREAT EVERYONE FEARS

- One creator reported revenue down 50% year on year, with students self-teaching from AI instead of buying. Real, and worth taking seriously.
- But the consensus was clear: AI can copy information. It can't copy trust, accountability, belonging or a real person in the room. That's the moat, and it's getting stronger, not weaker.
- The businesses growing right now lean into the human side rather than competing on volume of content.

SELL BELONGING, NOT RESULTS

- Giulia, an Italian teacher serving the Brazilian market and one of the biggest creators in the room, said her business turned the day she stopped selling "learn the language" and started selling "we're in this together."
- Her line: today anyone can learn anything online, but everyone wants to belong somewhere.
- She frames it as a tribe, not a school. Everything reinforces that, and it's what keeps people paying year after year.

REVENUE & RETENTION

Where the money actually is

THE REPURCHASE WINDOW IS 60-70%, NOT COMPLETION

- Teachable shared their own platform-wide data (Yas, their Customer Success Lead): students who are 60-70% through a course repurchase at 66-86%. Students who complete? Only 19-27%.
- At two-thirds through, they've proven your method works for them and they trust you. That's the buying moment.
- If you're waiting for completion to offer the next thing, you're offering it too late. Email at the 60-70% mark: "You're most of the way there, ready for your next step? Buy now, start later."

MOST STUDENTS NEVER EVEN START

- Also from Teachable's platform data: 88% of course buyers have never opened a single lesson, and around 30% never logged in at all.
- Getting people to log in and finish lesson one is upstream of any upsell.
- A simple onboarding lesson (how the course works, the schedule, what to expect) plus a "log in and start" nudge moves the needle.

LIFETIME ACCESS: DON'T STRIP IT, TEST TIERS

- Big debate on removing lifetime access to force recurring revenue. The room's caution: older audiences deeply value permanence, and you can lose a whole segment by taking it away.
- Better play: test tiers (6 months / 12 months / lifetime-premium) rather than removing the option.
- Use expiry as a re-engagement moment. Peers running automated expiry emails with a discounted extension see 20-30% renew.

LIVE & COMMUNITY

Cohorts and belonging

A LIVE COHORT PLAYBOOK WORTH STEALING

- Cap classes at ~12 so everyone actually speaks. Cameras mandatory.
- Set the rules with a short video students watch before joining (camera on, be alone, take turns). Saves you policing it live.
- Use breakout rooms, polls and chat tasks to keep everyone active.
- Bundle: sell the course plus a few months of free community, then convert to paid membership.
- Win-back: when someone's about to cancel, a feedback call that becomes a discounted lifetime-upgrade offer.

COMMUNITY MECHANICS THAT DO THE SELLING FOR YOU

- More from Giulia's model. Gated subscription: you can't just buy it. You have to attend the free classes first, which qualifies and warms people before they pay.
- Gift the extras. Masterclasses, cook-alongs, conversation groups given to members, never sold. Scarcity and belonging do the converting.
- A once-a-year premium/lifetime offer at an anniversary event, open to everyone, converts subscribers at an emotional high point.

TRUST & TOOLS

Building the relationship

THE 7-11-4 TRUST RULE

- From Philip's talk on using Substack as a funnel: people need roughly 7 hours of your content, across 11 touchpoints, in 4 different places before they trust you enough to buy (he credited it to Google's research).
- It reframes your podcast / video / email / social stack as one trust-building system that compounds, rather than separate channels.
- Check your own funnel against it: are you actually giving people enough to get to buying-level trust?

TRAIN AI TO WRITE IN YOUR OWN VOICE

- Stefano gave a brilliant talk on building a set of AI "skills" that write his campaign emails in his real voice, so he keeps his authentic tone without writing every word from scratch.
- Keys that made it work: feed it only your recent finished campaigns (last ~18 months), not day-to-day admin email; build separate small skills rather than one giant prompt; add a "humanizer" pass that strips the AI tells.
- The point isn't to sound generic and fast. It's to protect your voice while saving hours.

A DISCOVERABILITY CHANNEL FOR NEW AUDIENCES

- Philip's whole talk was on this: Substack as a top-of-funnel channel, not the revenue itself, but a way to reach people who aren't already searching for you, then funnel them to your courses. He's built it into serious course sales from a standing start.
- Every subscriber joins your email list (unlike a social follower), and the audience skews intentional.
- Note: it won't replace a proper blog for high-intent search traffic. Its job is new-audience discovery, not SEO.
- The question I left with: is our existing audience already on Substack, or are the people there a genuinely new audience for us? That's the thing worth knowing first, because the whole value is reaching people who aren't already following us.

TEAM

Getting off the bottleneck

HIRING, IF YOU'RE THE BOTTLENECK

- Hire for values and culture fit over raw skill, especially for a small team built on a personal brand.
- Learn the function yourself first so you can actually judge the work.
- Practical filters: state the salary upfront so people self-select, and screen with a short form of real scenario questions before any call.
- Several creators hire from their own audience, people who already love the brand.

The overall mood: this is a good moment to be a human-led teaching business, not a scary one. The relationships, the trust and the craft are exactly the assets that win now.