What Edutainment Is, and Why It Matters More Than Ever

The term "edutainment" is a relatively recent term, first appearing in documented form during the 1970s by the BBC. Yet the fundamental concept is ancient, with the use of storytelling, theatre, games and music to convey knowledge and shape understanding. Medieval morality plays, Greek dramatic traditions, folk tales and fables all functioned as educational instruments. The distinction between learning and entertainment has never been as sharp as institutions might suggest.

The modern movement crystallised with Sesame Street in 1969. Its creators made a deliberate decision to apply the production values and narrative techniques of commercial television to educational objectives. The result demonstrated that rigorous pedagogy and genuine engagement were not opposed forces but could be deliberately synthesised. This became the blueprint for the educational media that followed.

The 1980s and 1990s saw further innovation with the rise of interactive computing. Educational software titles such as The Oregon Trail and Where in the World Is Carmen Sandiego established that learning could be active participation rather than passive consumption. The word "edutainment" became associated with this emerging landscape: educational software, interactive museums, children's television, multimedia learning products.

By the early 2000s, however, the term had accumulated baggage. Educators increasingly felt that entertainment had come to overshadow educational rigour. The language itself seemed unsophisticated. Educational outcomes proved difficult to measure. Consequently, alternative terminology emerged: immersive learning, experiential learning, game-based learning, learning experience design. The word "edutainment" fell somewhat from favour in serious educational discourse.

What is remarkable is that 2026 finds us circling back to the same fundamental questions that were posed over five decades ago. How do we create experiences that people genuinely wish to engage with while still achieving meaningful educational outcomes?

The difference today lies in technological capability. Modern systems enable personalisation, adaptivity, real-time measurement and AI-driven content generation at a scale that was impossible fifty years ago. This creates a meaningful distinction:

Edutainment 1.0 centred on education plus entertainment: content produced for a general audience, broadcast uniformly, with limited feedback mechanisms. Edutainment 2.0 centres on education plus entertainment plus participation: content that adapts to the individual, choices that carry consequence, outcomes that are measurable, learning that becomes personalised in real time.

This shift from broadcast to participation, from uniform to adaptive, from measured impressions to measured outcomes represents the substantive change occurring in the field. It is this shift that forms the subject of this report.

The Conversation

Earlier this summer, we convened a roundtable of eight senior leaders working across education, broadcast, healthcare and museums. The participants were: Xand van Tulleken (Presenter, Operation Ouch, BBC); Phil Birchinall (Senior Director, Immersive Content, Discovery Education); Nick Dyson (Deputy Principal Innovation, The Ladies' College, Guernsey); Justin Rhodes (Producer, Learning and Engagement, Imperial War Museums); Jules Morgan (Project and Digital Innovations Director, Springer Health+); Matt Brandon (Series Producer/Editor, BBC Natural History); Kirstie Brockett (VP Production, Moonbug) and Rebecca Atkinson (Creator, Mixmups, Ultra Access, in absentia via reference).

The conversation spanned a diverse range of topics. Rather than formal presentations, the format was exploratory with each leader sharing their experience, challenges and observations. A distinct pattern emerged. Seven substantive insights kept surfacing across different contexts and verticals. These are presented below not as discrete themes, but as interconnected findings about how effective learning experiences are being built in 2026.

Engagement Determines Educational Reach

A striking consensus exists across all sectors that engagement is not a feature layered onto educational content. It is the prerequisite for educational impact itself.

This principle holds across contexts as varied as medical education, children's television and museum learning. The mechanism is straightforward: without attention, no learning occurs. Attention is a scarce resource in a fragmented media landscape. Therefore, the primary design challenge is not pedagogical purity. It is capturing and maintaining genuine engagement.

Contemporary educational programming demonstrates this consistently. Programming that has evolved over time shows a clear pattern: the most educationally effective content is also the most genuinely entertaining. The addition of humour, spontaneity and authentic human personality does not dilute educational value. It enhances it. Content that treats audiences as participants rather than recipients generates more powerful learning outcomes.

This principle extends even into apparently austere contexts. Medical education for healthcare professionals traditionally prioritises scientific rigour above all else. Yet experimentation with learning game formats based on commercial entertainment models demonstrates that entertainment-forward design proves remarkably effective even with highly specialised professional audiences. The tension remains real: entertainment cannot be cosmetic. It must serve genuine pedagogical purpose. Yet without authentic entertainment value, educational purpose becomes irrelevant because it fails to generate the attention necessary for learning to occur.

The practical implication is significant: entertainment and educational rigour are not competing design objectives. They are complementary. Organisations that can achieve both win disproportionate impact.

"Making the student the game maker is a really important next step. And teachers to be game makers. We run a Young Producers programme where students get to do my job, and they choose. Many of the choices became choose-your-own-adventure kind of stories."

Justin Rhodes | Producer, Learning and Engagement, Imperial War Museums (IWM)

Authenticity Outperforms Production Polish

A secondary but significant pattern emerges regarding content aesthetics and production values. There is a measurable shift in audience preference away from high-production polish towards authenticity and genuine human voice.

This shift is particularly pronounced among younger audiences who have grown up with AI-generated imagery and algorithmically curated content. The result is counterintuitive: as production technology becomes more capable, audiences increasingly value content that demonstrates clear human authorship, real stakes and unmediated perspective.

Declining engagement with traditionally high-production natural history programming illustrates this pattern. Competition from algorithmically generated nature content on social platforms is technically flawless and aesthetically perfect. Yet it fails to generate the sense of wonder that characterised earlier natural history programming. When audiences encounter perfect CGI alongside real creatures filmed in actual circumstances, the real consistently outperforms the artificial. What holds attention is genuine discovery, authentic expertise and evidence of real people navigating real situations.

The same principle appears across educational formats and age groups. The most effective educational moments are those where communicators abandon the "presenter" persona and speak directly as humans. This is surprisingly difficult to execute. The instinct towards professional distance and careful framing runs deep in formal communication. Yet audience response consistently favours the unguarded moment, the visible personality, the direct communication of genuine interest in the subject.

Educational content benefits from this principle as well. Encounters with people sharing genuine lived experience generate engagement that no amount of professional storytelling can replicate. The human connection becomes the primary educational mechanism.

In a landscape saturated with content, authenticity has become scarce and therefore valuable. The implication is that production investment should prioritise genuine expertise and human voice over technical polish. The production values that matter are emotional truth and clear human authorship, not technical perfection.

"People don't believe a lot of the interstitial bits of natural history anymore. CGI animals on TikTok are too perfect. The sense of wonder has changed. When I consume, I want to hear a person's point of view. I want to be on the shoulder. The mask is off. I'm not a presenter. I'm just going to talk to you as a human. It's very, very hard to do."

Matt Brandon | Series Producer and Editor, BBC

Personalisation Is Essential Infrastructure, Not Optional Enhancement

A critical pattern concerns the role of personalisation in educational effectiveness. Research reveals that personalisation is not a nice-to-have feature that increases engagement. It is foundational infrastructure without which modern educational experiences are complete.

This emerges most clearly in discussions about accessibility and neurodiversity. The insight that accessibility represents is profound: when individuals experience content designed with their specific needs in mind, the response is visceral recognition that they are being addressed directly. That moment of recognition that one's needs have been anticipated shapes engagement fundamentally.

Today, effective accessibility design enables personalisation of accessibility layers themselves: choosing captions or alt-narration, adjusting pacing, selecting interaction modality. This is not presented as special accommodation. It is structural to experience design. The principle extends beyond accessibility narrowly defined. It becomes about designing fundamentally for the reality that learners are different.

The inadequacy of one-size-fits-all educational design is measurable and practical. A nine-second interaction works for some learners. Others require more processing time. Still others need different interaction modes entirely. The inefficiency is profound: identical content is ineffective for non-standard learners not because the content itself is flawed but because its delivery does not accommodate different processing styles.

Contemporary children's programming increasingly reflects this principle. Content built explicitly around celebrating the everyday moments that occupy young learners' attention assumes that different children will have different starting points and developmental moments. Rather than force standardisation, the approach is to meet each learner where they actually are.

The practical implication is significant. Organisations that treat personalisation as foundational rather than supplementary achieve both broader reach and deeper impact. Designing for neurodivergence, different pacing and different accessibility needs improves outcomes for all learners, not merely those with identified differences. Accessibility becomes a design principle that benefits everyone.

"CoComelon is built around celebrating the everyday moments for kids. Everything a child experiences for the first time at that age is enormous and it's important. We ground our understanding in that reality, and that's what matters to us."

Kirstie Brockett | VP Production, Moonbug Entertainment

Real Choice Transforms Cognitive Engagement

A fourth pattern concerns the mechanism by which participation increases learning outcomes. Research reveals a precise distinction between the illusion of choice and genuine agency. Only genuine agency produces measurable changes in cognitive engagement and learning transfer.

The surface mechanism is straightforward: offer choices and reflect those choices back to the learner. Yet this can be cosmetic. A quiz appended to content, a button that enables progression, a branching path that ultimately leads to the same destination. These create the appearance of agency without its substance. True agency requires that choices genuinely alter the learning experience and that learners understand their choices have consequences.

When learners understand they will be making decisions, cognitive engagement shifts palpably. Not because the content itself differs. Because learners begin thinking more actively about what they encounter. The prospect of forthcoming decision-making activates different neural engagement patterns.

Educational experiments reveal this principle. When students are tasked with designing systems or games, they unlock different kinds of thinking than passive consumption generates. The design task itself forces conscious articulation of what matters. The medium of creation, whether game design or other forms, activates cognitive engagement that mirrors or exceeds the engagement generated by consuming well-designed content.

The distinction carries significant practical implications. Educational platforms often emphasise the range of choices available to learners. The evidence suggests that choice quantity matters less than choice authenticity. A single consequential choice outperforms numerous cosmetic options. The design priority should be ensuring that choices generate real consequences and that learners perceive those consequences directly. When choices matter and learners understand this, cognitive activation increases measurably.

"I like to see students as innovators and teachers as facilitators. I recently gave my students card, paper, glue and scissors and asked them to create a board game. It was great to see students building board games around navigating their social spaces. I saw one game which offered both a path of temptation and distraction, and another path promoting authenticity and bravery. The quickest way to win relied on the participant being themselves and making sensible decisions as themself. Students need to be given credit for the world they navigate as their norm."

Nick Dyson | Deputy Principal, The Ladies' College (Guernsey)

Measuring Learning Transfer Requires Different Frameworks

A fifth pattern concerns measurement and evaluation. Research identified a substantial gap between metrics commonly used to assess educational effectiveness and what actually indicates meaningful learning.

All practitioners grappling with educational effectiveness encounter this challenge. Measurement of viewing time, completion rates and time-on-platform capture engagement with content but say nothing about learning transfer or behaviour change. Yet organisations funding educational initiatives require evidence of impact. The tension is real.

Meaningful learning outcomes rarely manifest as clicks. They manifest as changed relationship to a subject, changed likelihood of return engagement, changed behaviour in relevant contexts. These are harder to measure but more meaningful as indicators of educational success.

One alternative framework emphasises immersive engagement rather than completion. Immersive engagement does not necessarily generate facts retained. It generates emotional connection to a subject domain. This emotional connection increases likelihood of return, deeper exploration and applied learning. The measure of success is not information retention, rather it is depth of information.

The most educationally valuable outcome of quality learning content is often invisible to traditional measurement: a changed relationship to a subject. The learner who completes a science programme may remember none of the specific facts. Yet they remain with a sense of warmth and excitement about science itself. That changed emotional relationship to a discipline is the outcome that predicts continued learning engagement. It is not captured in standard metrics.

The commercial reality adds another dimension. Beyond the internal challenge of defining learning success, there is the external requirement to articulate that success to funding bodies and decision-makers. The changed emotional relationship to a subject is real and valuable. Yet institutional funders often require different languages: evidence of behaviour change, improved performance metrics, measurable skill acquisition.

Compelling evidence exists of educational content generating measurable behaviour change. Interactive video interventions addressing public health challenges have produced documented changes in actual behaviour. This represents proof of educational impact that links content engagement to real behavioural change.

The implication is that evaluation frameworks must be multifaceted. Quantitative metrics remain necessary but insufficient. Qualitative assessment of changed understanding, emotional response and sustained interest provides essential dimensions. Measurement of behaviour change, where feasible, offers the most compelling evidence. Organisations that invest in multifaceted evaluation frameworks generate both better insight into their impact and better language for communicating that impact to stakeholders.

"The real measure is not just information retention. It's depth of engagement with the learning and then implementation in the clinical setting, but really knowing whether this occurs is a huge challenge. You don't always finish with the answers, but hopefully you've got a different relationship with the topic and it feels relevant and useful. If the education and its delivery is memorable and gives you a feeling of excitement and interest in this topic, that's quite a big win."

Jules Morgan | Project and Digital Innovations Director, Springer Health+

The Facilitator Role Is Essential, Not Redundant

A sixth pattern emerged regarding the role of human facilitation in educational technology. Research reveals that technology does not diminish the facilitator role. Rather, it transforms and intensifies it.

This finding contradicts a common assumption in educational technology discourse: that better tools and content reduce dependence on skilled human guidance. The evidence suggests the opposite. The more powerful the technology and the more sophisticated the educational content, the greater the skill required to deploy it effectively.

The orchestration layer between content and audience represents a human layer requiring judgment, real-time adaptation and relationship. This is not a technical question. It is fundamentally human. Educational design itself must accommodate real human learning rather than impose a predetermined pathway. This requires judgment, flexibility and willingness to adapt in response to what is actually happening with actual learners.

Human facilitation becomes transformative in contexts where technology provides enabling infrastructure. Bringing learners back into physical spaces, creating documentary challenges where learners become filmmakers, enabling young people to author their own learning stories. In each instance, the content or environment is enabling, but the human guidance is transformative.

A specific gap exists in technology discourse. At major technology conferences, discussion centres on content creation (increasingly solved through AI) and delivery infrastructure (increasingly standardised). What is systematically absent is discussion of interactive design itself: the layer in the middle where content and audience meet and where real-time adaptation occurs. This missing middle represents the space where human facilitation becomes essential.

The implication is significant for organisations investing in educational technology. Implementation success depends disproportionately on the quality of human facilitation. Technology investment should be accompanied by parallel investment in facilitator training, support and recognition. The human orchestrating the learning experience is not less important in a technological context. They are more important.

"I arrived thinking Stornaway was a technical achievement. But the thing that really strikes me is that you gather a group of people who care really deeply. The process of making a Stornaway would change the way you spoke to the audience. This is me. The mask is off. Stornaway drags your mind into the mind of the people you are talking to."

Xand van Tulleken | Presenter, Lead doctor and co-host, BBC

Expanded Access to Creation Transforms Participation

The seventh and perhaps most significant pattern concerns the shift from consumption to creation as a fundamental process with the learning experience. Research reveals that when creation tools are made accessible to educators, subject matter experts and learners, the entire nature of educational engagement transforms.

This pattern appears across multiple educational contexts. Educational programmes placing learners in authentic creator roles demonstrate fundamentally different engagement than content consumption. When students are tasked with creating choice mechanisms for narratives, the creative act forces explicit thinking about audience, narrative and consequence that passive consumption never generates.

Placing interactive design tools in learners' hands represents a fundamental shift. It transforms learners into storytellers. The full potential of learners as creators of educational content remains largely unexplored in most educational systems. Initial experiments demonstrate unexpected engagement and depth of learning.

The removal of technical barriers to creation enables this shift. When subject matter experts can author sophisticated interactive experiences without technical background or developer dependency, the circle of creators expands dramatically. The learning curve collapses when tools are designed for users, not engineers.

The creation process itself is engaging, generating the same cognitive activation that good educational content generates in consumers. The act of designing learning experiences, of making decisions about how information is presented and how choices unfold, is educationally powerful for the creators themselves.

The implication is substantial. The most significant educational outcomes may not come from improved content delivered to passive audiences. They may come from removing barriers to creation so that educators, experts and learners themselves become creators. This represents a transition from edutainment as content delivered to audiences to edutainment as a capacity distributed throughout educational systems. The shift from consumption to creation is not merely a pedagogical innovation. It is a structural transformation in how educational systems can operate.

"That's why we leapt on Stornaway: because it fills that 'What If?' over the horizon. When you put these tools in students' hands, it turns them into a storyteller. We haven't really seen the depth of that yet. The creation process itself is engaging, generating the same cognitive activation that good educational content generates in consumers. I'd never edited a video in my life and it was so easy."

Phil Birchinall | Senior Director, Immersive Content, Discovery Education

Three larger structural shifts emerge from the research, transcending individual findings. The first is a shift from broadcast to participation. The broadcast model assumes a single message transmitted to a general audience with limited feedback or adaptation. This model is giving way to participatory models where audiences are not uniform, engagement is personalised and feedback mechanisms inform real-time adaptation. This is not a preference. It is a functional requirement driven by fragmented media landscapes and audiences trained by algorithmic systems to expect personalisation.

The second is a shift from production polish to authentic voice. As production technology becomes more capable, technical polish becomes commoditised. Authenticity, genuine expertise and evidence of real human perspective become scarce and therefore valuable. Production investment should increasingly prioritise the substantive (the quality and authenticity of perspective) over the technical (the quality of image and sound).

The third is a shift from consumption to creation. As creation tools become more accessible, the economic logic of educational content changes. The bottleneck is no longer content creation by professionals. It is the distribution of creation capacity throughout educational systems so that educators, experts and learners themselves generate the content they require. These structural shifts form the substantive context within which contemporary edutainment operates.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FIELD

Three significant implications emerge from this research for organisations working in educational content, learning experience design and edutainment broadly.

First, engagement and rigour are not competing design objectives. They are complementary. Organisations should structure development processes to ensure that both are pursued intentionally rather than treating engagement as supplementary to core educational content.

Second, personalisation and accessibility benefit all learners. Designing explicitly for diverse processing styles, pacing preferences and accessibility needs creates more effective experiences for the general population. Accessibility should be structural rather than supplementary.

Third, technology's role is to extend human reach, not replace human judgment. Implementation of educational technology succeeds in proportion to the quality of human facilitation and adaptation. Technology investment should be accompanied by equivalent investment in facilitator capacity.

CONTRIBUTORS

This research draws on conversations with: Xand van Tulleken, Presenter, Operation Ouch, BBC; Phil Birchinall, Senior Director Immersive Content, Discovery Education; Nick Dyson, Deputy Principal Innovation, The Ladies' College, Guernsey; Justin Rhodes, Producer Learning and Engagement, Imperial War Museums; Jules Morgan, Project and Digital Innovations Director, Springer Health+; Matt Brandon, Series Producer/Editor, BBC Natural History; Kirstie Brockett, VP Production, Moonbug; Rebecca Atkinson, Creator Mixmups Ultra Access.

The roundtable was hosted and facilitated by Kate Dimbleby, Chief Executive, Stornaway; Ru Howe, Chief Technology Officer, Stornaway; Helen Hollyhead, Head of Commercial, Stornaway and Natasha McKenzie, Chief Marketing Officer, Stornaway.