

# Turning to Education for Fun

Photo



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In a 2013 episode of “60 Minutes,” Charlie Rose visits Bill Gates’s office to get a sense of where the billionaire philanthropist draws intellectual inspiration. First, Mr. Gates shows Mr. Rose the Codex Leicester, a 500-year-old Leonardo da Vinci manuscript that Mr. Gates bought in 1994 for \$30 million.

Then, with just as much as enthusiasm and nearly as much reverence, Mr. Gates

leads Mr. Rose to a bookcase filled with DVDs from the Great Courses. As the camera pans across various titles, Mr. Rose notes that Mr. Gates, a Harvard dropout, has now watched “hundreds of hours of college lectures” through these DVDs, which feature professors discussing, say, the search for the Higgs boson.

Still, at just 200 or so volumes, Mr. Gates’s collection was not nearly big enough to establish him as the world’s greatest Great Courses collector.

“We just had somebody last month who bought the entire library,” says Ed Leon, chief brand officer of the Great Courses. “It’s someone who seems to have made a lot of money in finance and retired to a tropical island. That’s where we shipped the entire library — over 500 courses.”

Photo



Jonathon Leven of Great Courses during the filming of “Redefining Reality: The Intellectual Implications of Modern Science,” taught by Steven Gimbel, a philosophy professor at Gettysburg College. Credit Vanessa Vick

for The New York Times

What does it mean when people who can afford to spend their time however they please hunker down in front of their flat screens to watch theoretical physicists or experts on other subjects lecture for hours?

Entertainment values have come to dominate many aspects of life, but another trend has been playing out, too. Call it the academization of leisure. It can be found in the live-streaming [TED Talks](#) lectures, the Great Courses, learning vacations, podcasts, science centers, brain-training games and retirement communities like Lasell Village in Newton, Mass., whose residents must complete “a minimum of 450 hours of learning and fitness activity each calendar year,” its website says.

These days, examples of what is often called edutainment are everywhere. As the word suggests, edutainment combines aspects of education and entertainment into products and experiences that seek to improve learning by making it not just painless but also pleasurable.

And while consumers will often pay prices that would please any Ivy League bursar, this kind of education is generally pursued on an elective basis, with no credits or certification at stake.

Learning through entertainment dates at least to Ben Franklin’s Poor Richard’s Almanack, which amused and instructed colonists with its mix of maxims, weather forecasts, math lessons and puzzles.

But traditionally, edutainment resulted from the kinds of things Neil Postman, a New York University professor and media theorist, criticized in his 1985 book, “Amusing Ourselves to Death.” In it, he argued that culture’s primary mode of discourse was shifting from print to TV, and that as a result, “politics, religion, news, athletics, education and commerce” had all been “transformed into congenial

adjuncts of show business.”

In Mr. Postman’s formulation of the world, show business alone did the encroaching. Lessons about multiplication were put to music. Local TV news anchors adopted the mindless patter of variety-show M.C.s.

But what is most notable about the current edutainment boom is how often it uses formats and techniques from education and academia to invade domains that were once primarily recreational — or at least nonacademic.

In the old days, business people networked over martinis. Now they prepare to mingle by consuming multiple TED Talks lectures (TED stands for technology, entertainment, design). Likewise, it sometimes seems as if no luxury vacation is complete without a concierge biologist on hand to decipher the mating habits of the mantled howler monkey. And thanks to farmers markets, picking up milk and eggs has turned into a chance for informal symposiums on pasture management.

Finally, there is fare like the Great Courses and online learning sites like Lynda.com, [CreativeLive.com](http://CreativeLive.com) and [EdX.org](http://EdX.org). Such material is hardly fodder for channel surfers. The Great Courses (which also come in audio formats) feature a college professor lecturing from 12 to 24 hours on topics like ancient Mesoamerica or behavioral economics. The living room couch in front of the television now functions as a site for in-depth learning.

Many factors underlie the ascent of such learning products. An aging population has leisure time and money to spend. Digital distribution lets content creators focus on smaller audiences with more specialized interests, and it gives users access to these products anywhere and anytime. The proliferation of media that results has in turn created a market for live events like TED Talks, the music and multimedia gathering SXSW and the [Comic-Con](http://Comic-Con) fan conventions, all of which offer lectures and symposiums that can turn up online later.

As long-established companies and personalities look for new sources of revenue in a rapidly shifting media market, they turn to educational offerings as well.

“I think like everyone else, we’re looking for new opportunities that bring in revenue and keep in line with our mission,” says Linda St. Thomas, chief spokeswoman for the Smithsonian Institution.

To this end, the Smithsonian has begun offering classes through the Great Courses line, as have National Geographic, the Culinary Institute of America and the Mayo Clinic. The Smithsonian, through its Journeys program, and National Geographic, through its Expeditions program, also offer more than 200 learning vacations a year, charging travelers thousands of dollars to forsake drinks by the pool for in-the-field instruction from art historians and volcanologists. The New York Times has ventured into this territory with its Times Journeys program, and it sells tickets to question-and-answer sessions with figures from the film and music industries, among others.

In “Amusing Ourselves to Death,” Mr. Postman lamented that a former Hollywood actor could be president. Now, former presidents are replacing professional entertainers as the top-billed stars on cruise ship vacations. Lech Walesa, former president of Poland, will visit with Smithsonian Journeys participants in Gdansk this summer. César Gaviria, former president of Colombia, will be on hand on a National Geographic Expeditions cruise off South America this fall.

While lunching with celebrity politicians on luxury cruises may seem frivolous, what has actually happened is that a purely recreational activity has acquired new intellectual ambition.

“There’s an increasing demand for meaningful experiences,” says Lynn Cutter, National Geographic’s executive vice president for travel and licensing. “When people have choices on how to spend their money, they’re valuing experiences more

than material things.”

And learning is often a crucial part of these experiences, partly because Americans today are much more educated than their predecessors. In 1940, according to United States census data, only 25 percent of American citizens ages 25 or above had high school diplomas or their equivalents. And only 5 percent of American citizens 25 or above had a bachelor’s degree or higher. By 2009, 87 percent of this demographic had a high school diploma, and 30 percent had a bachelor’s degree or higher.

Not that education ends with a bachelor’s degree these days, or even a Ph.D. In the fast-paced knowledge economy, lifelong learning requires lifelong learning. To keep their skills sharp and maximize income or employability, people turn to sites like CreativeLive.com to fine-tune their Photoshop expertise or learn how to use Instagram as a sales channel.

“We’ve served up more than two billion minutes of free education to every country on the planet,” says Chase Jarvis, the site’s chief executive and one of its founders.

Photo



Odessa Criales-Smith took an online course about succulent plants. Credit Vanessa Vick for The New York Times

Most of CreativeLive’s classes, which are clustered into categories like “Photo and Video” and “Art and Design” and streamed live from the company’s broadcast studios in Seattle and San Francisco, are intended to help people develop skills to put to professional use. “What we’re trying to do is create the most vibrant learning experience we can,” Mr. Jarvis says. “When we do a podcasting class, we get Alex Blumberg, a former producer for ‘This American Life,’ to

teach it. And since he's the best in the world at what he does, he puts on an amazing show.”

The surest way to dazzle today's lifelong learners is through expertise and instruction, not gimmicky and tacked-on showbiz elements. And yet because there is a sizable paying market for educational media — CreativeLive.com offers the initial live broadcasts of its classes free, then charges \$24 to \$299 for on-demand access to them — producers are investing more in this material. As a result, the teaching talent becomes better, the production values improve and educational courseware can be just as engaging as any other form of media.

It often has to be, says Nick Macey, chief product officer of Rosetta Stone, a language-learning software company. Mr. Macey has to develop products that people enjoy enough to use regularly and intensively, because that is what it takes to learn a new language. “So whether it's through highly entertaining content or live experiences with native speakers, we're always looking for ways to engage our customers,” Mr. Macey says.

As material becomes more enjoyable, ultimately some people begin to approach even difficult and sustained feats of learning, like achieving conversational fluency in Mandarin, as a way to unwind at the end of the day.

“Educated people love to learn,” notes Randy White, chief executive of the White Hutchinson Leisure and Learning Group, a company based in Kansas City, Mo., that helps develop things like children's play centers and farmers markets that combine education and entertainment.

These new educational approaches offer a more structured and productive experience than watching a situation comedy or a reality show. But the experience can also be as informal as you want it to be. “There are no exams,” the Great Courses website reassures. “No homework assignments. No prerequisites.”

Still, people accustomed to a steady stream of likes, retweets and other soft forms of assessment often view exams and quizzes as good things. [Rouxbe.com](#) is an online cooking school whose curriculum is so comprehensive that restaurants and culinary academies use it as a training tool. But according to Joe Girard, its chief executive, 80 percent of its customers are home cooks. And they want feedback.

“Not everyone thought that our customers would do quizzes,” Mr. Girard says. “But in the first six months that we introduced them, we had 500,000 quizzes completed. People love affirmation. They love to see that because they watched a video, they now know something they didn’t previously know.”

People also recognize that the Internet puts answers, experts and detailed instruction at their fingertips. And that increases their curiosity and willingness to tackle new subjects.

“Today, people learn online first,” says Jen Long, co-founder of [GardenTribe.com](#), a California producer of online instruction for home gardeners. “There’s no driving to the nursery. It’s go to Google and type in, ‘What should I plant in my garden?’ ”

That is how it worked for one GardenTribe.com customer, Odessa Criales-Smith. “I did a Google search because I wanted to learn more about succulents,” she says. “I didn’t know what I’d find. I was just searching for any information at all.”

A software reseller who works from home in Lovettsville, Va., Ms. Criales-Smith often used online courses to obtain certifications for the various lines of software she sells. So when GardenTribe.com came up in her search results, she bought access to one of its classes.

“I was just looking for a hobby to chill on,” Ms. Criales-Smith says. “Succulents was a great relaxing thing to do.” After viewing the first video, Ms. Criales-Smith bought additional classes and watched them at night in bed, projecting them from her



tablet onto her large-screen TV using Google's Chromecast device.

Over time, she says, she turned into a "succulents fanatic." And eventually, she began attending antiques shows and flea markets to sell arrangements that she makes of succulent plants. "Taking that class gave me the confidence to go ahead and start something," she says.

That first GardenTribe.com class that Ms. Criales-Smith took now goes for \$39. The DVD version of the Great Courses class "The Higgs Boson and Beyond" sells for \$199.95. "Changing Tides of History: Cruising the Baltic Sea," the Smithsonian Journeys vacation where you can talk about globalization with Lech Walesa, starts at \$6,995.

It is not always clear if a product or event is being used as entertainment or, say, corporate training. So credible estimates of the size of the edutainment industry are hard to come by. What is clear is that its target consumers are willing to pay for the experiences it can deliver.

"The most educated have the least amount of time," Mr. White observes. "So when they spend their leisure time, they want it as productive and high quality as possible. They're looking for experiences that can permanently change themselves — going to a fitness facility, gaining new knowledge. They don't want to waste their leisure time."

At the Great Courses, there is a rigorous process to make sure that doesn't happen.

"First, we write up a synopsis of what we want a title to be," Mr. Leon says. "Then we poll that with our customer basis." If it performs well, the company starts looking for professors to teach the course. "I have a recruiting team that scours the country for just the right person."

Candidates travel to the Great Courses studio in Chantilly, Va., and record a lecture. “We have a variety of people test for the same course,” Mr. Leon says. The samples are market-tested as well. “Our customers are going to spend 12 to 24 hours of screen time with this person, so it has to be someone who resonates with them.”

Once a professor is chosen, a course goes into full production. In 2015, the Great Courses will release about 40 new classes.

“This year, we’ve got 550 hours of content coming out of our studio,” Mr. Leon says. Because of all of that exposure to subjects like data analytics or world’s greatest churches, Mr. Leon says, “My production team is turning into semi-geniuses.” On an unnamed tropical island, a mysterious retired polymath may be, too.