



# Designing meaningful learning experiences

**The practical guide to  
creating digital learning  
that changes behaviour**



# There's no secret formula. But there are proven principles

There's no magic recipe for creating digital learning that works. Every subject brings its own demands, and every learner and organisation is different.

But there are principles that apply to all great L&D programmes. Understanding and applying these separates learning experiences that stick from ones that get clicked through and forgotten.

The learners we're designing for today have higher expectations than ever, shaped by their experiences on social media and by the technology that has transformed workplace learning more than any other: AI.

When learners can get factual answers from an AI assistant in seconds, courses that just transfer information have less value to offer. Today, eLearning must evolve beyond knowledge delivery. To remain engaging and effective, we need to focus on helping learners analyse information, apply judgement, and develop the critical-thinking skills required to make complex decisions under pressure.

Our focus in this guide is on design thinking to emotionally engage learners and build optimal experiences that will change behaviour and performance for the better.



# Make your digital learning binge-worthy

**Digital learning can be the most exciting part of your business. Fact. But first you need to strike a chord.**

Think about what makes someone binge a TV series or finish a podcast they only meant to sample: an *emotional* response that fully engages their focus and attention.

The same thing drives all great learning. The moment a learner emotionally engages with content – usually from a combination of curiosity, recognition, surprise, or a stake in the outcome – their brain shifts from passive processing to active engagement. That's the difference between content that merely gets clicked through and content that changes behaviour.

However, the competition for learners' attention in the workplace has intensified. According to [Microsoft's 2025 Work Trend Index](#), which analysed survey data from 31,000 workers across 31 countries, 80% of the global workforce say they lack the time or energy to do their job.

Perhaps even more striking is this figure from the same report: employees are typically interrupted every two minutes – from emails, meetings, invites, and Slack or Teams pings. Asking those same people to step away for training is therefore a hard sell.

Meanwhile, outside of work, people are having real conversations with AI assistants and learning new skills from 60-second TikTok videos. Popular apps such as Netflix and Spotify personalise every interaction based on individual behaviour and preferences. These

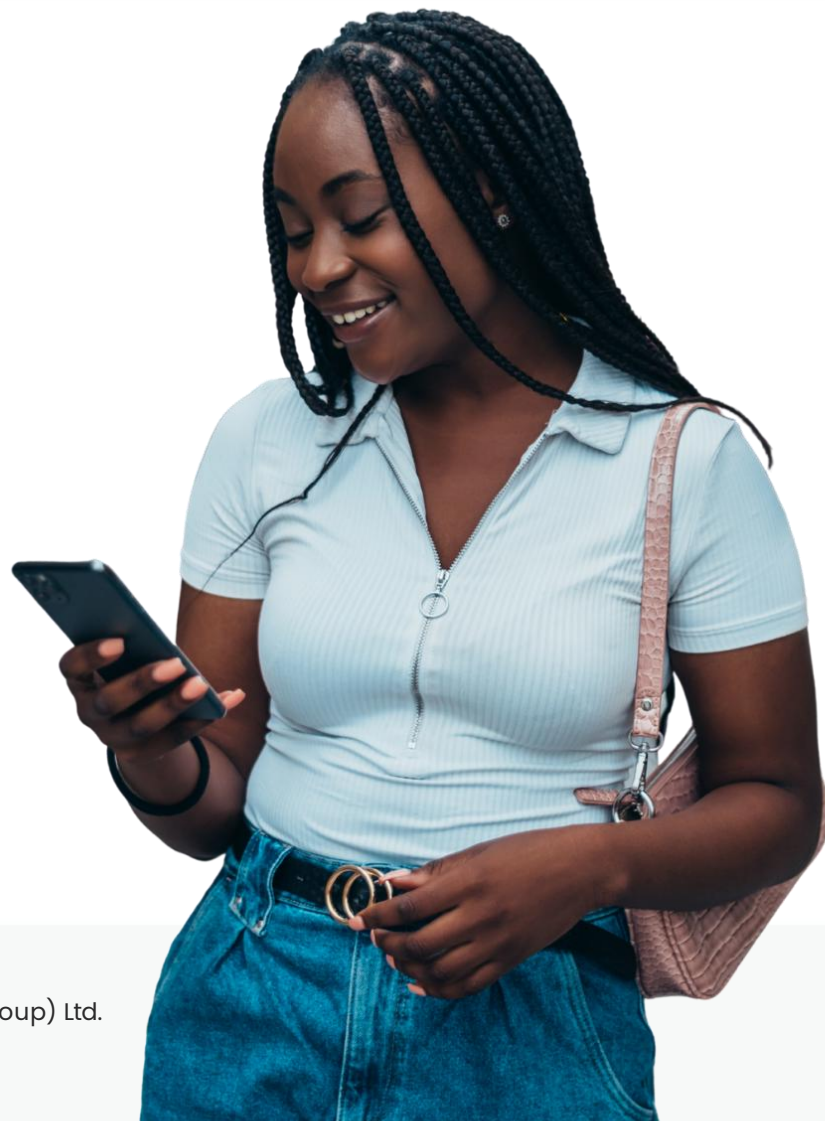


experiences set the benchmark for learners, who unconsciously carry those expectations into every digital interaction - including workplace training.

With so much going on, there's even more pressure to design eLearning content that engages the learner emotionally and cuts through the noise.

## Why does binge-watching (or scrolling!) feel so good?

Dopamine. When we enjoy something, our brains release dopamine, which makes us want more and keep going. Great learning design works the same way: build something people want to engage with, and the attention problem largely takes care of itself.



## The production barrier is gone. Now what?

For years, L&D teams wanting to create their own 'binge-worthy' content faced the same challenge: competing with the production values of external content companies was nearly impossible. A professional film crew brings specialist equipment and multi-million-pound budgets. Most L&D teams had a laptop and a subscription.

*That gap has narrowed, and quickly.*

Today's software allows anyone on your L&D team to create professional videos, build responsive courses that adapt to learners' choices, and translate them into dozens of languages in a matter of hours. Tools like Vyond and Articulate 360 are part of a new generation of AI-assisted platforms that have made production accessible to every team.

But similar tools are available to everyone else, too. Anyone can now shoot a compelling TikTok or launch a YouTube channel with nothing more than a phone. The volume of content competing for your learners' attention has exploded, and most of it is made by people whose entire job is to keep viewers watching. The bar has well and truly been raised.

Removing the production barrier has raised the stakes on design. When anyone can use software to create something that looks polished, the real differentiator is the quality of thinking behind it, and that's where L&D teams need to focus.

**71% of L&D professionals are exploring, experimenting, or integrating AI into their work.**

[Source: LinkedIn's 2025 Workplace Learning Report](#)



# Learning is an emotional experience

The world of neuroscience has taught us that emotion is the mechanism through which learning actually happens.

Without an emotional response, information is less likely to move beyond short-term memory. When a learner has an emotional response to content, they're far more likely to retain it - and act on it.

That's why two courses on exactly the same subject can produce dramatically different results depending on how they're designed.



# The four knowledge emotions: your practical toolkit

Paul Silvia's work on cognitive science identifies four 'knowledge emotions'. These are emotional states directly associated with learning, and they act as practical levers that drive engagement when they're part of the design.

Emotion	What it means for your design
<b>Surprise</b>	Unexpectedness hijacks attention. A statistic, scenario, or reveal that challenges what the learner expects creates immediate receptivity. Design it in deliberately - don't let your content be predictable.
<b>Interest</b>	Curiosity fires when content is unfamiliar but not overwhelming. The learner needs to feel capable of understanding it. Pitch your content at the right level of challenge, not too easy and not too hard.
<b>Confusion</b>	Productive confusion promotes deeper thinking. A well-designed dilemma or ambiguous scenario makes learners work harder and retain more. Counterintuitive, but proven.
<b>Awe</b>	The rarest and most powerful. When learning connects to something significant - a life changed, a system understood, a purpose felt - it creates lasting impact.

Source for four knowledge emotions: Silvia, P. (2026). Knowledge emotions: feelings that foster learning, exploring, and reflecting. In R. Biswas-Diener & E. Diener (Eds), Noba textbook series:

Psychology. Champaign, IL: DEF publishers. Retrieved from <http://noba.to/f7rvqp54>



Here's the principle in action.

**"75% of pilots have admitted to microsleeps while on duty."**

or

**"73% of pilots said they had not had sufficient rest between shifts."**

Source: [\*European Transport Safety Council\*](#)

Which is more surprising? Which one do you want to learn more about, or gather more information on? The first stat, right? That's the surprise emotion at work, and it's entirely a design choice. Making that choice deliberately in your course design will create content that will grab and hold your learner's attention - however it's delivered.

## Your emotional design checklist

Before finalising any module, ask:

- ✓ Does this create surprise at least once?
- ✓ Is there a moment of real interest - something the learner didn't know they didn't know?
- ✓ Is there productive confusion that makes them think, not just read?
- ✓ Does anything connect to why this matters for the learner?

Four yeses = designing for retention, not just completion.



# Great learning starts with storytelling

Storytelling is how humans process the world, from cave paintings to Netflix, from eulogies to TED talks. The medium changes, but the mechanism doesn't, and in learning, it's the most effective design tool you have.

Your learners are surrounded by masterfully told stories all day long, optimised by billion-pound platforms with teams of behavioural scientists. Your learning doesn't need to out-budget them. It needs to do the one thing they can't: make the story feel directly relevant to your learner's work, team, and decisions.

## What makes a story work for adult learners?

Adult learners already have their own habits and opinions, so if a story just repeats what they already know, they will tune out. To get their attention, the story needs to push back against their assumptions, introduce a realistic complication, or offer a completely new perspective.

### Every effective adult learning story needs two things:

1. The story connects directly to the goals of the learning.
2. The main character faces a choice where every option has real pros and cons.



That second point is where some eLearning could be sharpened. When the right answer is obvious, there's no story or engagement, just a test. What makes a scenario stick is tension, realistic options, and consequences that reflect the real complexity of workplace decisions.

Here are a few examples of scenarios that demonstrate this:

- A manager is facing a team member who's underperforming and struggling personally.
- An employee who discovers something that might be a compliance issue but isn't certain.
- A customer service rep whose script won't cover what's in front of them.

These are the type of moments people face at work day in, day out, and they're exactly what great scenario design is built around.

## **Bring storytelling to life with branching scenarios**

Branching scenarios are a powerful way to put storytelling into practice. Learners face real choices, and every decision leads to different consequences - just as it would in real life. AI-assisted tools have made them far more accessible to build, so the focus can stay where it belongs: on the quality of the design.



# Storytelling through visuals and text: the science of what stays

Combining text and images is proven to enhance learning. A 2025 brain imaging study in [Frontiers in Psychology](#) found that when text and illustrations are placed close together, key areas of the brain associated with memory, semantic processing, and decision-making showed significantly higher activation - and learners answered questions more accurately. When text and images were separated, the brain worked harder just to connect the two, leaving less capacity for actual understanding.

The implication for learning design is clear: show and tell. Place visuals alongside the text they relate to, use animation or interactive graphics to bring scenarios to life, and give learners enough stimulus to draw their own conclusions - so they feel part of the story, rather than an outsider.



## Personalisation: the next evolution of eLearning

Outside of work, your learners have come to expect personalised experiences. Their social media feeds know exactly what they're interested in, and their streaming services anticipate what they want next. Even their AI assistants adapt to how they communicate. It's no surprise, then, that learners are more likely to engage with eLearning content when it offers some level of personalisation.

Personalisation in learning doesn't mean a different course for every person. It means designing scenarios set in a world they can relate to, using case studies from their sector, and branching pathways that respond to their choices. At its best, this is learning designed to develop judgement, not just transfer knowledge.

Learning pathways can also be tailored to address individual skill gaps or support specific career goals. With adaptive platforms and AI-powered content tools, L&D teams can now create more personalised learning experiences at scale.



# Design for judgement, not just knowledge

For most of eLearning's history, the primary goal was knowledge transfer. The objective was to get information from the organisation into the learner's head, efficiently and at scale. That's still a valid goal, but no longer the most important one.

With AI assistants embedded in the flow of work, employees can look up factual details such as compliance guidelines or product specifications in seconds. The raw information is already at their fingertips. The challenge for L&D is training people on how to use that information when it matters.

Designing for knowledge	Designing for judgement
Information transfer	Judgement development
Compliance completion	Behaviour change
Knowledge check at course end	Decision practice in realistic scenarios
Passive consumption of content	Active navigation of complexity
Telling people the right answer	Letting people discover why it's right

## You're not a content creator. You're an experience architect

If the goal changes, the designer's role must evolve too.

The job has always been more than producing content. But it's often been reduced to a functional role involving building courses and maintaining libraries, all driven by tight deadlines and budgets.



The brief has changed, and your job now is to architect experiences that transform workplace behaviour and decision-making. This requires thinking like a performance consultant and putting learner-centric instructional design at the heart of every decision.

It's a more demanding brief, but L&D teams that make this change stop being a support function and start being a strategic one.

## How the principles of great learning work in 2026

The principles of great learning design are the same as they've always been. What AI has changed is how to deliver them:

Design principle	How to deliver it in 2026
Emotional engagement through story	AI-assisted scenario scripting + animated videos + branching scenarios
Visual storytelling for retention	AI video and image generation + rapid asset creation at scale
Knowledge emotion design	Adaptive platforms with integrated AI that regulate difficulty and novelty
Role-relevant personalisation	AI content tools that tailor scenarios to specific situations and roles
Judgement development through practice	Branching scenario design with AI-generated decision tree scaffolding
Measurable performance impact	Learning analytics connected to business KPI data



## What doesn't change

With all the new tools and shifting roles, it's worth being clear about what hasn't changed.

- The learner is a human being, driven and motivated by emotions that can't be predicted by AI tools.
- Great design still needs great thinking that requires a deep understanding of the needs of your specific learner population.
- Stories still need to feel true to life so that your learners can relate to them emotionally. A generic scenario about anyone won't engage the learner mindset.
- Learning still needs to connect to improved performance in the workplace.

Designing great eLearning content matters just as much as it always did, if not more. The opportunity lies in using AI to enhance good design, not replace it.



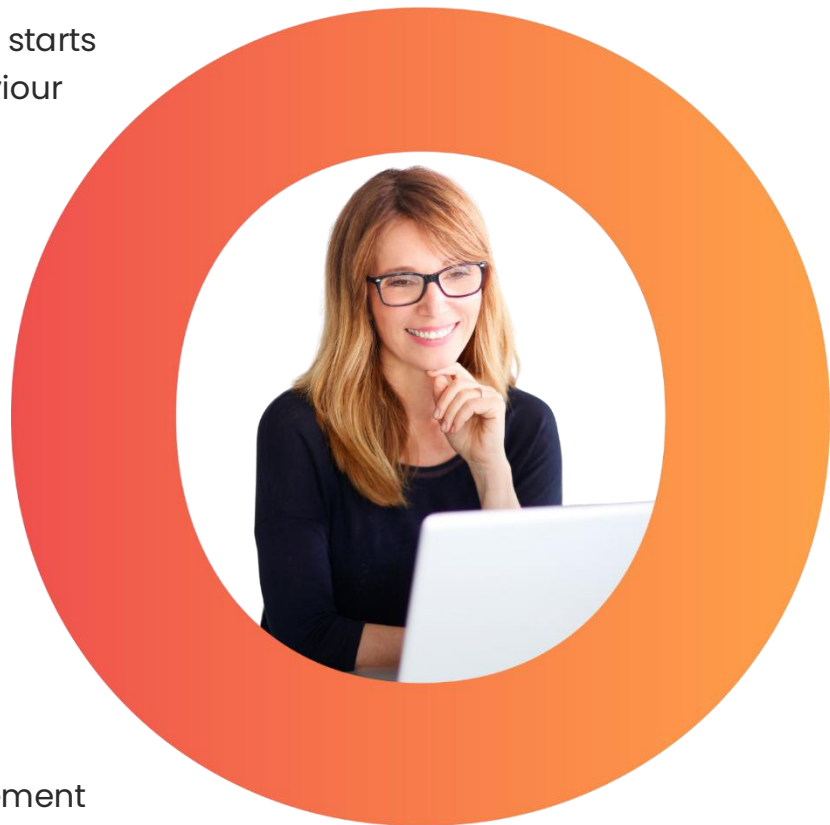
# Measuring the impact of improved design

Completion rates tell you someone opened the course and clicked through to the end. In most cases, they don't tell you whether anything changed as a result.

Designing for meaningful learning starts with a specific capability or behaviour goal and works backwards from it. You know what you're trying to change, and you've agreed with business stakeholders what evidence of that change looks like. A 100% completion rate with positive feedback means very little if the behaviour you were targeting hasn't altered.

Modern learning platforms and AI-assisted analytics make it increasingly possible to track performance at key points in the learning journey, moving measurement beyond course completion towards actual behaviour change. That shift elevates the role of L&D by linking it directly to KPIs and business outcomes, but it requires L&D leaders to ask a different set of questions:

- **Did they complete the course? → Did their behaviour change in the situations the course addressed?**



- **Did they pass the assessment? → Are they making better decisions under pressure?**
- **Did they say they enjoyed it? → Has performance, error rate, or escalation rate improved?**

## **Design for measurement from day one**

Before building anything, agree on three things with your business stakeholder:

1. The specific behaviour you're trying to change
2. The metric that shows it's changed
3. Your starting baseline

Then design the learning to create that behaviour change. It's good for accountability, and it makes every design decision sharper.



# Great learning starts and ends with the learner

Humans naturally connect with meaningful stories and emotional hooks. The latest L&D tools and platforms exist to help you build those connections.

Because AI has cleared away most of the old production hurdles to creating great content in-house, the real differentiator now comes down to how well you design your L&D programmes to meet your audience's needs.

## Your practical checklist

Before you build your next learning experience, here are key questions that will help you build effective eLearning content:

- ✓ What specific behaviour or judgement are we trying to develop?
- ✓ What emotional response do we want to create, and where?
- ✓ Where's the story? Who's the main character, what's their dilemma, and what are the real consequences?
- ✓ Are we using visuals to tell the story, or just decorate it?
- ✓ How does this feel relevant to this specific learner, in their specific environment?
- ✓ What will we measure, and how will we know it's worked?
- ✓ Which tools in our stack make this faster, better, or more scalable, without sacrificing the design?

## Turn great ideas into measurable impact

From bespoke content to expert consultancy, we help organisations create learning that sticks. Get in touch to find out more.

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