

Signs of

THE TIMES

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THE INTERACTIVE PERFORMANCE LAB AT UCF IS LEADING THE PACK WHEN IT COMES TO SIMULATION AND ROLE PLAYING.

➤➤ At one time or another, everyone has left an important meeting thinking, 'I should have said this,' or 'I knew the answer to that — I can't believe my mind went blank!'



PHOTO BY JUSTICE MITCHELL

The staff of i.d.e.a.s. participating in an iRoleplay session produced by the UCF Interactive Performance Lab. On the screen is Duncan Kennedy (left) of i.d.e.a.s. immersed in a roleplay scene with an inter-actor.

No matter how many questions or scenarios for which we prepare ourselves, we're limited by our personal viewpoints and thought processes. But groundbreaking initiatives at the University of Central Florida (UCF) are about to revolutionize how companies train their employees to make better decisions, sharpen their negotiating tactics and interact more efficiently with people of all backgrounds.

The Interactive Performance Lab was developed five years ago by its executive director, Jeff Wirth, and is an applied-research laboratory in the School of Film and Digital Media.

"The focus is on live, human-to-human interaction that's supported with digital media," Wirth explains. "The idea is not to replace the human experience, but to augment it."

One of the lab's applications is being adopted by the business world. Called iRoleplay, the process is fairly simple, but what it accomplishes is unique.

Here's a real world example of how iRolePlay works: the vice president of a company is sending his sales manager to meet with an important client. He wants to ensure the manager will be able to handle whatever is thrown at him. So he contacts Wirth's team to stage a role-playing experience that gives the manager an opportunity to practice his people and negotiating skills.

Wirth's team goes directly to the business. There they set up cameras in an office where the scenario will play out, and they send video to another room where others can watch.

"Because the viewers are in a different room with a live video feed," Wirth explains, "the participants are not as self-conscious as they would be when role playing in front of a crowd."

The V.P. briefs Wirth and his team of "inter-actors" about the details of the situation, including what he hopes to accomplish from the meeting and some background information about the client. The inter-actors then interact with the manager in the role of the potential client, facilitating a particular experience or variety of experiences. During the training session, those

watching can deliver feedback to the main participant in real time through a digital messaging system. So in this case, the V.P. could advise the manager to talk slower, or to stop tapping his feet, or listen more closely. This allows the person to change his behavior immediately — in real time — instead of after the fact.

By acting out potential scenarios while receiving continuous input from colleagues, participants are able to alter their tactics immediately to master the situation at hand. Having the opportunity to respond to the inter-actors' different questions and behaviors allows employees to go into their meetings better prepared to handle whatever comes their way.


"What's interesting about iRoleplay is that the real-time interaction and learning is not just between the two subjects involved in the training simulation, but also among the observers back in the control environment," comments Duncan Kennedy, vice president of innovation for i.d.e.a.s., a past iRoleplay client.

Everyone on Wirth's team is uniquely trained in five areas: acting, story, technology, improvisation and social psychology.

They are students and graduates as well as professional performers, all of whom have been trained at the Interactive Performance Lab.

Most of Wirth's work so far has been for research purposes, but he is currently in discussions about adapting iRoleplay for use by several businesses in the medical, legal, sales and hospitality fields. While other companies and universities are engaging in simulation and role-playing, only UCF's iRoleplay application combines inter-actors, digital delivery, and real-time feedback.

There are almost no limits to where this application could be used. Wirth believes it will prove valuable in the medical industry because it integrates both hard and soft skills, such as technical ability and bedside manner.

"You get the best of both worlds," Wirth says, "the human experience and digital media." 

TAKING IROLEPLAY A STEP FURTHER

The University of Central Florida Interactive Performance Lab's iRoleplay isn't limited to business-related scenarios. The team has ventured into healthcare, as well. According to Executive Director Jeff Wirth, the team has participated with UCF's Department of Communicative Disorders as part of a research program on styles of Alzheimer's care giving.

"We brought in people from the Alzheimer's Association to coach the actors so they accurately represent the characters (Alzheimer's patients) they're playing," says Wirth.

The goal: to give the caregivers an external perspective on the situations they confront daily. The research compared traditional in-service care giver training versus an in-service with interactive role playing to find out which style is more beneficial.

The Lab is currently in discussion with the UCF Center for Autism-Related Disorders to conduct role playing with parents of autistic children.

"Parents would have a chance to practice some of the skills that they've been trained in before they apply them in real life settings," explains Wirth.

Now, that's a role worth playing.