Can you outline some of the work that Independent Living Resources (ILR) does?

NC: In addition to our R&D activities with the National Institutes of Health (NIH), ILR also conducts program evaluations for agencies directly involved in child welfare and workplace safety. Our staff members have decades of direct, hands-on experience that feeds into our comprehensive implementation and evaluation of programs and services contracted by both public and private entities. For example, our own state of North Carolina has contracts with ILR to provide training for staff and caregivers, as well as life skills activities to help improve outcomes for youths transitioning to adulthood. In addition, multiple states have included our workplace safety training and materials as part of their overall training on personal safety in the human services profession.

Why do you think the Adolescent Real World Simulation (ARWS) program has been so successful?

NC: The ARWS – an eLearning multimedia program that equips adults to run Real World Simulation events for youths – has been highly successful so far. It has been very helpful for busy professionals who need reminders of when specific critical tasks need to be accomplished. The Real World tasks are divided into specific areas and the eLearning program comes with detailed instructions for completing specific tasks, which users find very valuable. Downloading documents and adapting them to their specific community is just one way that users can appropriate the Real World Simulation event. Users also enjoy having indefinite access to the program for future events and/or to refresh their learning.

Are there any particular groups of young people that you hope the ARWS program will target?

NC: Given ILR’s focus, the Real World Simulation program was originally developed to target young adults transitioning from the child welfare system. Yet the unique aspect about this program is it can be easily adapted to reach any adolescent population – indeed, all young people need adult skills. For instance, some years ago I trained a group of professionals based at a correctional facility for young adults. With a few adaptions, the Real World Simulation was implemented to provide the incarcerated youths with real-world experiences to help prepare them for their release into the community. Inmates learned how to balance their finances, make productive decisions regarding their lifestyles and determine what educational careers might best fund their interests. The program was also adapted to include a section that taught these youths how to resolve their legal issues in the real world. Correction officers have since shared this model with other facilities across the country, indicating the effectiveness of the Real World Simulation.

In what ways does ILR collaborate with other organizations and communities, and what are the benefits of this?

WG: We invite many groups into our facilities to learn about who we are and what we are attempting to accomplish. It is through such collaborations and sharing of ideas that we are able to meet the multiple needs of our communities and targeted audiences. We pride ourselves on reaching out to as many organizations as possible within our greater community to share and learn what might be both effective and long lasting for those who need the services we provide.

ILR has won numerous awards for their services. Which are the most prestigious and how have they helped the organization to develop, particularly in relation to ARWS?

WG: The awards with most significance are those received by the youths we have worked with over the years. Their continued accomplishments as they move into adulthood provide long-lasting rewards.

NC: The awards received from those impacted by our services increase staff motivation and morale. ILR has been recognized by caregiver organizations, the local community in Durham, North Carolina, and national groups of independent living workers who use our products and services. Durham’s local care program system – entitled BECOMING – coordinates Real World events at least twice a year because they have found the Real World program provides excellent results. Now local schools and programs serving youths at risk have collaborated to coordinate these events together.
Advancing independent living

A group of researchers and professionals based at Independent Living Resources Inc. in the USA is developing cutting-edge programs and tools to help adolescents needing support to gain life skills.

WHILE THE TRANSITION to adulthood can be challenging for any young person, it is much more difficult for those who do not have the structured support of a loving family. Unfortunately, studies have suggested that child welfare systems in many countries do not effectively equip teens to become self-sufficient adults. As a result, many of these youths struggle to function in the adult world after they leave foster care and are unable to achieve their full potential. There is therefore an urgent need for the wider implementation of practical initiatives that enable these at-risk adolescents to gain independence.

One organization seeking to address this need is the North Carolina-based Independent Living Resources (ILR). As a research, consulting and publishing company, ILR specializes in helping child welfare agencies develop programs that enable older youths in the care system to achieve successful transitions into adulthood. To date, its extensive R&D activities have resulted in the creation of books, online curricula and educational games for both the benefit of youths that learn from them and adults that teach them. The company is also a national leader in the field of workplace safety and has developed a curriculum for human services professionals dedicated to personal safety in the workplace. Nancy Carter is the Executive Director of the organization, which launched in 1987. Since then it has received many awards and demonstrated that its materials and activities are having a positive impact on both individuals and communities.

INNOVATIVE INITIATIVES

ILR has implemented two particularly important initiatives: Real World Youth Simulation (RWYS) — a one-day event for youths that simulates situations they may encounter in the adult world and equips them to make informed decisions — and Real World Instructional Seminars (RWIS), a two-day training program for adults interested in running the RWYS.

Youths are invited to attend the RWYS event after completing specific preparatory tasks. Upon arrival they are given a job card that corresponds to their career interests and educational level. In the morning, they attend mini-workshops on insurance, banking, budgeting and social skills, then in the afternoon they are placed within simulated ‘real life’ situations in which they are challenged to devise monthly budgets with reference to the salary on their job card. They are also taught how to respond to and manage life crises, keeping within the means of their finances. The event concludes with a feedback session in which youths review what they have learned and set goals for the future: “A day event that replicates the real world allows young adults to play a life-size video game,” Carter enthuses. “Despite the ‘pretend’ nature of this event, youths experience the joys and frustrations associated with their purchases and decisions. Lessons learned from this simulated experience can then be retrieved in the real adult world.”

As for the RWIS, the first training day involves a mock RWYS event in which the adult participants experience the event from the youths’ perspective. The second day focuses on how the simulation event can be replicated and what relevant adaptations could be made. In response to growing interest in Real World events, ILR has developed specific tools – an online curriculum and an Interactive Timeline – to reach and train a wider audience to replicate the RWYS. Carter and her colleagues hope that these tools will make the program sustainable for years to come.

A PIONEERING PROJECT

As a result of the successful implementation of the RWYS and RWIS programs, ILR has developed, under a National Institutes of Health Small Business Innovative Research Grant, another visionary project: the Adolescent Real World Simulation (ARWS). The purpose of the ARWS is to develop, implement and evaluate the use of an internet-based multimedia program that teaches adults — such as foster care social workers, educators and other youth workers — to plan one-day Real World Simulation events for adolescents between the ages of 13 and 21. To achieve this, the ARWS has four main objectives: first, to create a full database with detailed user information; second, to develop an interactive online replica of the RWYS that will enable adult users to experience the simulation; third, to make an interactive Real World Toolkit to help users compile a Real World Interactive Timeline that is appropriate for their own geographic area; and finally, to evaluate this knowledge transfer by incorporating three key learning stages — preparation, management and follow-up — into an eLearning system.

The ARWS is aimed at adults working with those older youths who are in need of transition services. As a comprehensive eLearning platform, the idea is that ARWS will enable adults to translate the principles they learn into practical activities that address the specific needs of the youths they work with. Ultimately, the hope is that communities will be empowered to train adolescents to become self-sufficient, facilitating their successful transition into the real world.

ADVANTAGES OF E-LEARNING

The ARWS’s eLearning approach means that it can be accessed nationally, reaching a wider audience. ILR designed this approach in conjunction with Horizon Video Productions (HVP), a company with extensive experience constructing online educational training for a range of industries: “By incorporating a variety of teaching styles...”
and delivery methods throughout Real World’s curriculum, we appeal to the many different learning styles of our audience,” elaborates Jason Cooper, Director of Multimedia at HVP. “We’ve blown the standard PowerPoint, slide-based approach out of the water. Learners get immersed in the content, leading to high-level retention of what they learn.”

The research to test the effectiveness of the ARWS was a key part of the overall project, particularly because many resources for human services professionals are not subjected to thorough evaluations. The success of eLearning was reflected in the results of the evaluation, which showed a 32.9 per cent improvement in knowledge-gain scores in comparison to the usual face-to-face training technique, as Dr Raymond Kirk, ILR Director of Research indicates: “Viewers can control the pace of the presentation, and have opportunities for real-time knowledge testing of curriculum content, the opportunity for initial learning, internalization and retention is vastly improved”. One of the main advantages of the eLearning approach is that users are provided with immediate explanations as to why they get an answer right or wrong: “Because users sometimes ‘guess’ when responding to questions, this technique allows them to be provided with accurate information even if they guess correctly,” Carter explains. “We believe this feedback method directly results in increased post-test scores.”

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

There is widespread recognition that the ARWS has the potential to enhance quality of life as individuals make the transition from adolescence to adulthood. Donna Mitchell, HVP CEO, states that her staff “went above and beyond because they knew this had a chance to change people’s lives”. Since the completion of the study there has been lively dialogue between participants and researchers – and many human services professionals across the USA have expressed interest in utilizing the eLearning approach.

Looking to the future, Carter and her colleagues believe that the ARWS will have a strong impact on the socioeconomic prospects of the next generation. Training youths how to gain control over their environment has important implications for individuals and society at large. Indeed, research demonstrates that individuals’ ability to make informed life decisions enhances their positive participation in the local community as well as the nation as a whole, which in turn reduces the burden on the taxpayer.

INTELLIGENCE

ADOLESCENT REAL WORLD SIMULATION (ARWS) PROGRAM

OBJECTIVES

• To create a full database to capture user information and simulate coordination of real world activities
• To develop an interactive online replica of a Real World Youth Simulation that provides adult online learners with a practical experience that is from the youth perspective, and recognition of the details needed to create a comprehensive real world simulation
• To create an interactive Real World Toolkit based on the Real World Planning Guide (© 2002, Independent Living Resource Inc.)
• To test feasibility of transferring knowledge and creating motivation by integrating three core learning stages (Preparation, Management and Follow-Up) into an eLearning system

KEY COLLABORATORS

William Griffin, CEO, Principal Investigator
Raymond Kirk, Director of Research
Donna Mitchell, CEO, Horizon Video Productions, Inc.
Jennifer Meade, Training Director, BECOMING
Stan Holt, Director of Community Initiatives, United Way of the Greater Triangle
Forsyth County Real World Committee
Halifax County Real World Committee

PARTNERS

Strong Able Youth Speaking Out (SaySo) • Real World BECOMING • Various schools and youth programs

FUNDING

National Institute for Minority Health and Health Disparities (NIH)

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NANCY CARTER has been a social worker since 1983. She earned degrees from the Schools of Social Work at both Western Carolina University and the University of North Carolina (UNC) at Chapel Hill. After volunteering at a halfway house she went on to work as a clinical social worker in pediatrics at UNC-Hospitals, pregnancy support services, child development, and foster care recruitment and training. Carter joined Independent Living Resources Inc. in 1993 as Program Coordinator, moving to Associate Director in 2006, and Executive Director in 2012.