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Virtual Classrooms Deliver Real Advantage for UM Education Majors

Mixed-reality teaching experience helps students develop skills

DECEMBER 20, 2018 BY SARA MCALISTER



UM senior Bre Comley (left) and graduate student Gabby Vogt interact with student avatars through Mursion. Last school year, 800 students in the School of Education practiced with the cutting-edge technology system and are required to use it at least twice as part of their coursework before graduating. Photo by Megan Wolfe/Ole Miss Digital Imaging Services

OXFORD, Miss. – Meet Ava and Dev. They are in middle school. Ava is quick-thinking and decisive and likes to be challenged with new ideas and concepts. Dev is a rule-follower who is self-driven with high standards.

Ava and Dev are not your average students. In fact, they are not even real students at all. They are avatars in a virtual classroom at the University of Mississippi **School of Education**, where education majors are gaining valuable, hands-on teaching experience even before their student teaching.

Mursion, originally called TeachLive, is a cutting-edge technology that delivers customized virtual reality training to provide professional challenges that exist in the job every day.

Developed at the University of Central Florida, Mursion is being used at more than 85 campuses in the United States. Since 2012, Mursion has grown at UM. Last school year, 800 students in the School of Education practiced with the system and are required to use it at least twice as part of their coursework before graduating.

“Through Mursion, the mistakes students used to make in front of real students can now be made in front of avatars,” said Tom Brady, the school’s Mursion coordinator and a clinical associate professor. “This way, a student can watch back for feedback and see themselves teaching for the first time.

“Students are able to see how they miss student avatars falling asleep or on their phone; until this iteration, it may go unnoticed for two or three minutes.”

Mursion is designed so that if a student does not do well, there are no consequences because the avatars just forget and the student can start again. If the teacher does that in the classroom, the kids don’t forget.

Since all the qualities of the virtual classroom are controlled by a faculty member teaching the class, students who feel they did poorly can re-enter the virtual classroom and teach the lesson again without having affected student learning. Depending on the lesson objectives, sessions typically last anywhere from 10 to 20 minutes.

The system works from two ends. From one end, a teacher interacts with a screen showing a



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OXFORD, Miss. – Peer recognition is a rewarding experience for anyone, but University of Mississippi researcher Amir Mehrara Molan was elated when an article he co-authored recently received the Most Cited Paper Award at the 102nd Transportation Research Board meeting in the nation’s capital. The International Journal of Transportation Science and Technology presented the civil engineering

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Young Alumna Gives Back to School of Accountancy

OXFORD, Miss. – Stephanie Jennings Teague, of Chicago, sees her commitment of \$100,000 to the Patterson School of Accountancy’s new building at the University of Mississippi as a means of saying “thank you.” “It is a way to show a small token of my appreciation to Ole Miss, the faculty and staff, and the accounting

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Reuters: Keep an Eye on the Money Supply

U.S. inflation roller coaster prompts fresh look at long-ignored money supply By Michael S. Derby NEW YORK – The amount of money sloshing around the U.S. economy shrank last year for the first time on record, a development that some economists believe bolsters the case for U.S. inflation pressures continuing to

classroom with multiple avatar personalities. On the other end, a trained actor candidly speaks through a voice modulator and mimics certain movements through handheld controllers, basing reactions on predetermined personality traits of the Mursion students.

UM elementary education major Scarlett McCombs interacts with student avatars via Mursion. Photo by Megan Wolfe/Ole Miss Digital Imaging Services

"The actors work very hard on changing their pitch just a little bit, and through the modulator, a 20-year-old woman can sound like a 13-year-old boy," Brady said.

As of now, two actors provide all the voices. Each session is organic and personal; they are not scripted, but personality descriptions of each avatar are provided for a foundational, yet unique, experience.

Abby Wilson, a senior **theatre** major from Oxford, learned about Mursion through David Rock, UM education dean, who saw her perform in several high school productions.

Once the Mursion acting job opened up, he reached out to see if Wilson would be interested. She uses her theater background to help her act out as a middle schooler behind the screen. But there is a lot more to the job than just acting, Wilson said.

"The job is way more technical than anything else," she said. "Before this, I had never even picked up an Xbox controller."

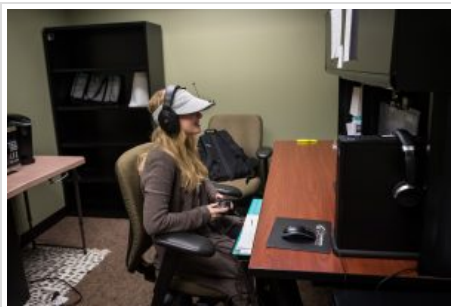
Much like activating a Kinect or Xbox, the user walks in front of a Kinect cable until the system confirms he or she is identified. The avatars have many controls to react back to the teacher, much like those on an Xbox or Wii controller. Through a wireless connection, the teacher can be heard and seen as he or she interacts with the virtual students on the screen.

Scarlett McCombs, a master's student in **elementary education** from Oxford, is another Mursion student actor. While Wilson's experience covers acting, McCombs' covers the classroom.

"Many candidates do not have much experience with public speaking or working with children, and the Mursion experience scaffolds them toward success in both of these areas through providing the most authentic virtual experience we can," McCombs said.

Together, their qualifications and studies make the perfect fit for a realistic and credible student classroom experience.

By having real humans behind the virtual students, the sessions mimic the everyday parts of being a teacher very well. Specifically, student behaviors are designed to challenge the teachers, occasionally even lashing out or acting inappropriately.



UM graduate student Scarlett McCombs interacts with student avatars via Mursion. Photo by Megan Wolfe/Ole Miss Digital Imaging Services

A new dynamic soon will be introduced to the classroom, when UM faculty will add a student who struggles with dyslexia and a friend who mocks them in class.

"If you see these sorts of things for the first time in a real classroom, you are more likely to crash and burn and let down some real kids, but instead, they are seeing it here first," Brady said.

The avatars act on three levels. The first level requires student avatars to act relatively obedient; if they "goof-off" and are disciplined by the teacher, they will immediately listen and get

back on task.

The second level generates pushback, and avatars may speak inappropriately to the teacher. They may fall asleep, play on their phones or "air-drum" on their desks when they are not interested in what the teacher has to say.

The hardest level generates the kids to not let the teacher get anything done; it is not used in either section for the Ole Miss classes.

Larry Christman, aka "Mr. C," is a retired Oxford Elementary School principal and the Mursion lab facilitator. Christman is usually in the room with the students as a coach and evaluator.

Christman began facilitating Mursion about seven years ago and has dealt with many nervous students over the years.

"Most of my students have never taught a lesson or even stood before a group of peers and made any kind of public speaking," he said. "I tell them it's normal to feel some anxiety. That, hopefully, it will help them when they go to student teach."

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There is no such thing as perfect performance in a Mursion session. Christman said his role is to help students learn to be adaptable in the sometimes unpredictable profession of teaching.

"Several years ago, I had a young lady who got up to teach her lesson and started crying," Christman said. "She just froze up! My graduate assistant and I took her out in the hallway. We consoled her.

"I told her to go back in the room and complete her lesson. She then did a wonderful job!"

Mursion is required for all students, but it is not graded. It is used for feedback. This helps create a more realistic and calm environment for students to develop into teachers.

"I learned a lot from the two TeachLive sessions that I completed," said Lizzy Sloan, a senior **elementary education** major from New Canaan, Connecticut. "They were both very meaningful experiences. I learned that it is normal to feel nervous before teaching students, especially for the first time, and to work through those feelings.

"TeachLive helped me feel more confident with regards to my teaching abilities because I was able to receive immediate feedback from Mr. C."

The university is helping Mursion grow across state lines, too, specifically to Alabama. Jan Miller, dean of the College of Education at the University of West Alabama, was thrilled to incorporate Mursion into the curriculum after hearing from Ole Miss users.

"Integrating Mursion into our educator preparation program helps to provide opportunities to start teaching on day one with more proficiency in classroom management and more confidence in the pedagogy of teaching," Miller said.

Using Mursion early in the education program ensures candidates will be better prepared for future professional experiences, she said. With the help of UWA, UM is continuing to push Mursion expansion efforts across the country.

Mursion also has room to grow at UM. Rooms are available for off-site locations such as Southaven and Tupelo, using the actors in Oxford.

"We can do more ... there is room to expand to offering sessions all week long," Brady said.

Last year, UM faculty added a counseling session with virtual parents. This "parent-teacher meeting" will act as a new dynamic for the students, because teaching not only involves children, but also their parents. This will allow students to learn to deal with many different kinds of parent personalities.



UM graduate student Gabby Vogt interacts with student avatars via Mursion. Photo by Megan Wolfe/Ole Miss Digital Imaging Services

"Students are trained on communication strategies they might use for 11 difficult parent types they might encounter in the TeachLive simulation," said Sara Platt, UM clinical assistant professor of special education. "These parents might be helicopter parents, disengaged parents, intimidating or threatening parents, or parents who are not concerned with school at all."

Platt and Debbie Chessin, retired associate professor of education, worked on this course for to give Ole Miss students opportunities to apply data evaluation and communication skills.

"This is the time for (students) to make the mistakes and receive guidance, so they should have no fear," Platt said.

A 2018 evaluation from the School of Education found that almost 90 percent of Ole Miss education students believe the Mursion simulation feels like a real classroom and that they are more confident to teach real students after their experience. Additionally, more than 90 percent of students say they would recommend the Mursion experience to peers who want to be teachers.

"I tell the students that nothing will take the place of flesh-and-blood students, but Mursion is a close second," Christman said.

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