

An Interview with Timm Boettcher

ACTE recently interviewed Timm Boettcher, president of Realityworks, a company that produces interactive tools for education, such as the RealCare baby simulator.

ACTE: What products does Realityworks offer?

TB: We specialize in simulation technology and curriculum for career-tech. We also have a focus on health education and life skills training. Most people know us by our infant simulators that are used in high school for family and consumer sciences education and early childhood education classes as well.

ACTE: Can you tell us a little bit about your financial literacy and tobacco addiction products?

TB: The financial literacy product is called Juggling Act. That program simulates or allows the student to walk through and see what it's like to have a child and what it costs, and what it really is like to be on your own. Our smoking prevention program is a wonderful interactive program that allows a student to experience what it's like to be in a smoker's shoes, and then to build those refusal skills that are so important for students to have when they're confronted with smoking.

ACTE: Your baby simulator looks very realistic from what we've seen. Is there any data that interacting with such a highly realistic simulation is that much more effective than lower-tech simulators?

TB: There have been more than 20 studies conducted on our products that support the significant positive effect of including infant simulators in life skills curriculum. As you might guess, the results show that using simulators improves students' attitudes more than using curriculum alone. This makes sense to most people because the learners are immersed

in the subject matter as part of the simulation, as part of the interactive hands-on experience. The research findings are based on experiential learning theory and our product is based on that same theory. Educators like the baby to be as real as possible so the students can really experience what it's like.

ACTE: On the flip side, does anyone every say, "This is too real for kids?"

TB: No. Actually, educators who work with young people and adults tell us the packages are just right for what they are teaching. Parents of teenage babysitters need to know how to cope with the frustration of caring for an inconsolable baby and what can happen if they are tired or not prepared for the stress of all that crying. I don't think we've gone too far on the realism side; it's just right.

ACTE: Do software and curricular resources come with the simulators?

TB: All of our devices are paired with curriculum that meets select national standards. The software for programming the simulations and retrieving data comes with the RealCare Baby II-plus program, and it has been a huge timesaver for our customers in recent years.

ACTE: If a teacher is going to implement these in the classroom, is it done on a case-by-case basis, ad hoc, teacher by teacher, or do you find that entire schools or entire districts are purchasing these resources for all of their FACS classes?

TB: In many cases we have entire




districts purchasing our programs for the FACS classes within that district. We have products in approximately 70 percent of the schools in the U.S. (We've been selling them to education for the last 14 years.) We've been able to do pretty well getting our programs into schools and having an impact on students.

ACTE: Your products are tied to important and sensitive life issues. Do you keep your curricula pretty neutral on these topics?

TB: When it comes to educators using the RealCare program for teen sexuality or pregnancy prevention, which I think is what you're referring to, our curriculum is independent of any one viewpoint. The

emphasis is on the baby and the infant care simulation and how our programs can be a great supplement to build on whatever the instructor is trying to teach the students. The lessons end up being, "If you were to have a baby at a time in your life, here are the impacts it would have on you, physically, emotionally, financially, and are you ready for that?" The answers to those questions differ from youth to youth but the educator's part is to provide some context to examining life choices and rules. I think the great thing is that the take-home portion with the baby gets parents talking with their kids about all of this important stuff as well: contraception or abstinence or physical or spiritual health depending on the program's motive. Extending the classroom beyond just the physical walls of the school is one of the great things our program does as well, so that it gets that parent, family engagement.

ACTE: And are you developing any new products?

TB: Yes, we're working on additional products and technology, in particular for career-tech. We can see the direction that education, workforce development, technical literacy is going and we want to continue to be part of that exciting work. Health sciences, information technology and financial sectors are probably the particular areas of great interest to us. We're always looking for partners in innovation as well. 

To listen to the podcast of the full interview with Timm Boettcher, president of Realityworks, visit www.acteonline.org/podcasts.aspx.

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