



TRAINING & TECHNOLOGY PERSPECTIVES

Ideas from experts on how emerging technologies are influencing adult learning

We humanize computers? Could they treat us likewise?

Jay Cross is director of the Omega Institute, the internal online-training arm of Omega Performance, which develops interactive multimedia training for large corporations worldwide. He can be reached at jaycross@well.com.

The Media Equation: How People Treat Computers, Television, and New Media Like Real People and Places by Byron Reeves & Clifford Nass (Cambridge University Press, 1996) has changed forever the way I think about media design.

The authors, two Stanford professors, present the results of numerous psychological studies that convinced them that people treat computers, television and new media as real people and places.

Media was simply not an issue during most of human evolution. The brains we inherited from our cave-man (or cave-woman) ancestors aren't equipped to deal with it. Computers, television, and movies fake us out.

People are polite to computers. We treat computers with female voices differently from those with male voices. We don't want television to get too close, to invade our personal space. We don't like computers to criticize us but we think them wiser when they do. We're more likely to believe specialists who deliver the news than generalists, even if the news is exactly the same. We'll accept media as teammates and imbue them with personalities.

Emotional Responses

The authors write that, "Media can evoke emotional responses, demand attention, threaten us, influence memories, and change ideas of what is natural. Media are full participants in our social and natural world."

There's even a halo effect. If I like the friendly specialist delivering the news, I'll also rate the color and picture quality superior.

What does this mean for trainers? Because people take media so seriously, simple animations can evoke as strong a response as an IMAX movie or a video simulation. It doesn't take much fidelity for video to deliver its message. High visual production values probably add little to training effectiveness.

For designers of multimedia audio is a good place to invest. It delivers more

