By Priska Neely

The new dean of the School of Dramatic Arts at the University of Southern California has a message for young actors: “The old paradigm of train hard, get an agent and wait for the phone to ring is long dead,” said David Bridel.

Instead, actors are getting their starts or boosting their careers through social media channels or through new mediums like online shorts. Bridel’s job now, he said, is to bring the school into this new world.

“It’s a time of radical change, of course, in the dramatic arts – just as much as in most other fields and professions – because of the digital revolution,” said Bridel, who stepped into the position in April after serving in an interim role for several months. “To the extent that I know, I’m trying to create a new version of what a school of dramatic arts might look like.”

The school will hold an all-day event for students Saturday about new career paths available to performers. Social media mavericks will talk with students about the artistic potential in Snapchat and how to find opportunities on YouTube. Industry professionals will field questions about the opportunities in virtual reality and video games.

Another way Bridel is working to help the school adapt is by bringing in more industry partnerships. The school will offer a class with the comedy site Funny or Die in the fall to give students experience with generating short-form online content. The school already has a class, which Bridel co-created a few years ago, modeled after “Saturday Night Live.”

Bridel formerly held the positions of associate dean of global initiatives and director of the MFA acting program. As an actor and playwright who studied English and drama in England, he still believes that stage and classical training is essential and beneficial – even for a YouTube star. But Bridel, who went to clown school and started one in Los Angeles, is also a big believer in versatility and range.

Bridel recently talked with KPCC by phone about his vision. (The conversation has been edited for length and clarity.)

KPCC: In journalism, the lines between print, broadcast, digital are really blurred and in most programs you have to kind of do it all. Are those walls coming down in acting as well?

BRIDEL: There’s two things that I would emphasize as we look to kind of build this new version of training for the actor and the performer. One is that the old paradigm of train hard, get an agent and wait for the phone to ring is long dead. It’s not to say that that doesn’t happen to some — whether they’re lucky or lucky is a different issue — some people still function on the old model. But I believe nowadays the chances for a creative artist with performing skill to build their own career, especially in the early stages, are richer than ever and I think it behooves a school such as ours and a university such as USC to really open up the pathway for an actor to learn how to create their own content and to effectively represent themselves as soon as they get out into the industry.

KPCC: So, it’s not really a question of pedagogy and what they’re learning in terms of the process of acting, but it’s more a change on the business and marketing side?

BRIDEL: That’s a big part of it. The second point I would make is this: There is now technology that actors need to know which didn’t exist maybe eight to 10 years ago. And I think in the other disciplines of the arts — whether it would be visual arts or cinema — the need for the practitioner to have a high level of technical skill is something that we’re very familiar with. But for an actor to be able to cope with anything from the challenges of voiceover to the realities of working in green screen or especially in motion capture, these are the kind of technical skills which have never been necessary for actors until the
to develop their careers. My goal is to put that tool-learning into the curriculum, so that a graduate of our school is able to hit the marketplace at speed.

And Beck’s a wonderful example. He left here, he moved into sketch comedy, then he figured out how to put that sketch comedy on YouTube and then suddenly, bam!, he was picked up for a commercial that went nationwide and then the next thing you know he’s on “Saturday Night Live.” That’s a whole new version of what it means to sort of evolve toward success. By now, of course, he has an agent and an manager and all those things but he didn't need that to start and that’s really a hopeful sign for many of our students.

KPCC: If someone is going to an arts high school and they’re in a position where they have experience and could get an agent right out of high school, do you recommend that they come to your school?

BRIDEL: Yes, I always would. I think that the classical foundation is of eternal value — to any one individual to any group of students, to any institution. One can look at the classics and scratch one’s head and say, ‘Can’t we move a little faster and get more current?’ But the deepest forms of storytelling are the most ancient ones and I do think that even a sketch comedian or someone who’s developing a persona for YouTube, will immeasurably improve their craft if they’ve passed through the classical lexicon. They just need to know how to apply it to this modern world. I think that without it, then there’s the danger that one would never touch on the kind of depths that are available to storytellers.

KPCC: How did the Funny Or Die class come together?

BRIDEL: We had already been interning with Funny or Die — that is sending students over there to do their semester-long internships — and that apparently had been going very well. And parallel to that we decided to embark upon a class, which would focus on generating short-form content for the Internet. And I just suddenly realized that those two things were happening under the same roof and they really needed to live together. So we contacted Funny or Die and said, “Look, we’re starting this class, would you be prepared to partner with us on it?” And they said yes, and it was really nice and simple.

They’re going to kind of mentor the students, and then in the middle and end of semester, they’ll come in and get critiques and if things work out well and we get great content, then they said they might run it on the site. So it’s an exciting new kind of paradigm for how we teach in connection with an industry partner. And it’s certainly something that I plan to develop in other areas — for example, motion capture.

KPCC: When you’re coming from a stage-first theater background, does this shift to online content bother you at all?

BRIDEL: It doesn't bother me remotely. And that might be a distinction between my sort of inheriting this position and others who might have been more conservative about what it means to be surrounded by all of these different forms and styles of the dramatic arts. My career has had an enormous amount of range and depth from very, very serious, deeply classical to much more modern applications. And I think that’s the only way forward for a school like ours, which not only has to do justice to the students that are here but also in mindful of a national competition to remain current and attractive.

I think I probably have some colleagues who, you know, will need a little help. But, on the other hand, there are so many people in the school who are crying out — and I mean faculty as well as students — who are already saying ‘thank you’ this is exactly what needs to happen and we’ve known it in the back of our minds for sometime.