

Mediated culture / mediated education

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Michael Wesch

This transcript of a keynote speech by **Michael Wesch, Assistant Professor of Cultural Anthropology at Kansas State University, USA**, at the 2009 Association for Learning Technology Conference in Manchester, England, has been lightly edited by Michael Wesch. This text transcript is in the ALT Open Access Repository at <http://repository.alt.ac.uk/656/> [96 kB PDF]. You can access a video of Michael's keynote from <http://www.alt.ac.uk/altc2009/keynotes.html>.

Other assets relating to the talk will be findable from <http://www.alt.ac.uk/altc2009>.

Everything I learned about teaching I learned in a room much like the one we are in right now. I teach large classes of 400 students or more in lecture theatres much like this one. In the past five years this room has been fundamentally changed. There is literally something in the air ... and it is nothing less than the digital artefacts of 1.4 billion people and computers all over the planet connecting, all of it accessible by devices that many of you have in your pockets. If you have twenty thousand students on a university campus, chances are that you have sixty thousand of these devices at your disposal. Now what you going to do with those devices?

I was thinking about Tom's comment here from the 1970s. He was talking about the little ticker tape that came out of that old computer that he had. Imagine if he just had one of the devices of today. What if you were to offer just one of your little devices to a university in the 1970s. Imagine what they might pay for that. Imagine the lines that would form and all the debates over who gets to use it. And now we have sixty thousand of those on our campuses and they're all connected. What are we going to do with them?

What I'm going to ask you to do is to look at these profound changes and the questions that they entail somewhat differently. If we really want to understand the changes that are happening, we're going to really have to think outside the box. So I'm going invite you to do is to go with me to New Guinea and I'm going to share with you an example that will illustrate how media can change a culture in dramatic ways.

It can take up to two months to arrive in these very remote villages. These are some of those rare places on the planet that are truly disconnected. There is no Internet, electricity, or running water. From 1998 to 2006 I spent almost a third of my time in places like this. They are small-scale horticulturalists, growing taro, sweet potato, bananas, and other crops while also raising a few pigs. They are also opportunistic gatherers, harvesting spiders and their eggs after a big rain, or capturing snakes while they are lazily trying to digest their latest meal.

Soon after I arrived, we had the pleasure of eating one of these snakes. Though it was delicious, I started to get a bit scared. They had captured the snake less than 40 meters from where I was sleeping. The hut was full of holes. A snake could easily slither in at any moment. That night I was especially careful to seal myself up tight in my sleeping bag. I was always trying to seal myself up entirely to protect myself

from the bugs and rats, but now I was especially vigilant. Unfortunately, it is very hot in the tropics, and every night I would end up outside the sleeping bag, exposed to the elements. The night after we ate the snake, it happened again. And this time I woke up and felt this thing resting right across my chest. I freaked out. I managed to grab it with my left hand and throw it to the ground. I managed to pin it down with my left hand. But as I tried to move right arm so that I could pin it down with both hands I found that I couldn't move it. It's about this time that I realised that I had actually pinned down my own right arm. And what had happened is that my arm had actually fallen asleep, resting across my chest.

So there was no snake and I had to explain to people why I was wrestling on the ground with my arm. It sounds like a funny story now, but this was devastating and horrible two months of my life. And the main reason why was because I had completely lost all sense of my identity and myself. We create our identities by expressing ourselves to others. Here I had no way of expressing myself, and my CV was meaningless. I had to create myself all over again.

What I realised as I was rebuilding my identity in New Guinea was that I had to do it entirely through face to face conversations, which was very different than how I built my identity growing up in the USA. These differences became the core of my study. And then writing came into the region, and I started studying the effects of writing on the local culture. I do not have time to recount it all here, but let me just say that the effects were tremendous and unexpected.

We often talk about media as tools. But media are not just tools. They are not just means of communication. What I want to propose that media *mediate* relationships. When media change, our relationships change. If you think about that, collectively all of our relationships create our culture, so when you talk about media change, you're also talking about cultural change. As Marshall McLuhan once wrote, "We shape our tools and thereafter our tools shape us." And of course the question we're all very interested in is "What about the new tools of social media and "Web 2.0"? How are these tools shaping us?"

I made a video about this which many of you have seen; *The Machine is Us/ing Us*. The video starts with text on paper and outlines a fifteen year history to digital text. It looks at the journey from HTML to XML and the ways in which these changes opened up new forms of participation like blogs, wikis, RSS feeds, and other developments. The video concludes with the idea that it is not just about linking information, it is about linking people. And when you recognize that, it means that we need to rethink many aspects of our society and culture, including education.

Here is a simple little survey to illustrate a problem with higher education in the US right now. First I asked, "How many of you do not actually like school?" Over half of them raised their hands. And then I just changed the question very slightly and asked "How many of you do not like learning?" No hands. So we've created an institution that's supposed to be all about learning, and yet people who love learning don't love that institution. So something is wrong. We also find students facebooking and instant messaging during class, buying textbooks they never open, and paying for class but never showing up. In a survey we found that students are completing only

49% of the readings assigned to them, and even worse they only find 26% of the readings relevant to their life and their learning. That's a 74% failure rate.

So you might look at these numbers and think, “Okay, they’re disengaged, they’re not really into school. They're lazy and apathetic.” But then you put the same people in a stadium in front of the American Idol cameras and you get a very different picture. There is a real mystery here. Why are people of this generation so disengaged in school, yet so excited about the possibility of being the next American Idol?

I started working with some of my students on this question, and one of them found the following quote that seemed to explain the American Idol phenomenon:

“What we are encountering is a panicky, an almost hysterical attempt to escape from the deadly anonymity of modern life. And the prime cause is not vanity, but the craving of people who feel their personality sinking lower and lower into the whirl of indistinguishable atoms to be lost in a mass civilisation.”

And that seemed to really fit, it seemed to explain the American Idol or Pop Idol phenomenon. But it turns out that this is Henry Canby in 1926. He wasn't talking about American Idol. He was talking about poets of the 1920s. And the anonymity he was describing was the anonymity of city life. There are many other factors contributing to the rise of anonymity, anomie, disengagement, and the decline of community: the Industrial Revolution, assembly line production, suburbanization, and of course, television.

By the 1950s, television had become the primary platform for any conversation of significance in our culture. But of course it is a one-way conversation. You have to be on TV to have a voice. You have to be on TV to be significant. And there you get the American Idol craze.

By the 1990s TV was completely saturating our lives. This was when I was coming of age, and I was very much a part of the “MTV Generation.” If we were having this conference in 1992, we would have been talking about the MTV generation, and here is what we would have said. The MTV Generation has short attention spans, they are materialistic, narcissistic and not easily impressed. Thomas de Zengotita has this great quote that really captures why this is. He writes, “In the midst of a fabulous array of historically unprecedented and utterly mind-boggling stimuli ... whatever.”

When we found this quote and we thought “This is great. We need to do the history of whatever”. And so we did and we found that prior to the 1960's, the word “whatever” had several different meanings. You can look them up in any dictionary and they're pretty standard. But in the late '60's it takes on a real cultural heft. It becomes part of a revolution. You could say “whatever” in such a way as to say “I'm not part of this system.” And this use of the word continues to the present day.

By the 90's there's actually another word that emerges from the MTV generation; the word “meh”. And the first use that I know of is from this episode of the Simpson's:

Bart Simpson: We're the MTV generation.

Lisa Simpson: We feel neither highs nor lows.

Homer Simpson: Really? What's it like?

Lisa Simpson: Nyeh.

As you heard, it sounds more like "nyeh," not Meh, but on message boards it started being written as "Meh." The Simpson's caught on soon after and included "meh" in a later episode

Homer Simpson: How would you, like to go to, BLOCKOLAND!?!

Bart and Lisa: Meh.

Homer: But the TV made me think that/

Bart: We said, Meh.

Lisa: M-E-H. Meh.

And so in the same year 1992, that the Simpsons started Meh, was also the year that reality TV started to take off. Why did this happen? There is another mystery here. It is not just that people are desperate to be on stage, but it is that they feel like they belong on stage. It is indicative of a rising sense of self-importance. Here's an interesting statistic for you. In the US in the 1950's, only 12 per cent of people agreed with the statement "I am an important person." By the 1980's, that number was 80 per cent (Twenge 2004). That's a tremendous difference within a thirty year span. And likewise we see a new version of the word "whatever" exemplifying this trend. From the late 90's to the present, "whatever" comes to be used to express self-importance and egotism, like in this clip from Southpark.

Video clip

Talkshow Host: Our next mother is Leanne Cartman. Her son claims to be the most out of control kid in the world, and says there's nothing his stupid mom can do about it. let's bring him out. Here's Eric Cartman.

Eric Cartman: Whatever, whatever. I'll do what I want.

So by the late 90's "whatever" had a narcissistic edge to it.

Jean Twenge has captured many of these trends in her book, Generation Me, which is appropriately subtitled, "Why today's young Americans are more confident, assertive entitled and more miserable than ever before." And the reason why they're miserable is because they're having what's called a "quarter-life crisis". A quarter life crisis is when you go through your education and you're told that you're the best person in the world and you're really important and then you get out in the real world and you can't find a job and you can't find anything important to do, and so on. Or you line up for American Idol and when you are not selected, you're shocked.

Jean Twenge worries that it may be a narcissism epidemic, but I think it is a little more subtle than that. All of these things our youth are engaged in are part of the search for identity and recognition in a culture in which identity and recognition are not given. Charles Taylor has written about this in the Ethics of Authenticity. He notes that this search leads to two slides: 1. towards self-centred modes of self-fulfilment, and 2. a negation of all horizons of significance. In the first case, the self-centred modes of self-fulfilment lead to this type of disengagement that we see in our

classrooms, politics, and elsewhere. And in the second, the negation of all horizons of significance is at the core of our sense of a loss of community.

And that pretty well sets the cultural stage for the introduction of social media.

We have all heard many reasons for why social media is a major revolution. It is not controlled by the few. It's not one-way. It is created by, for, and around networks, not masses. It transforms individual pursuits into collective action. And it makes "group" formation so ridiculously easy that we are starting to question whether or not "group" is even the right word to describe them.

But our research team is interested in a slightly deeper matter, building from three premises. One, we know ourselves through our relations with others. Two, new media create new ways of relating to others. It follows then that (3), new media create new ways of knowing ourselves.

So what we're doing is diving into this social media world and thinking about how it might shape the way that we know ourselves. For the past three years we have been focusing on YouTube. The idea of studying YouTube is a little crazy of course, especially when you consider that there are now 20 hours of video uploaded every minute. So if you're actually trying to understand YouTube as a whole, you can't possibly keep up. To give you some idea, there's almost 1.7 million minutes per day uploaded. That's over a thousand times faster than you can watch it. At this moment, it would take you almost six lifetimes to watch everything on YouTube. But you would never catch up. There are 493,714 videos uploaded every day. And that's just on YouTube. We now estimate that there are over a million videos uploaded every day online. Over 99.9% of which is completely irrelevant to you.

So we had to focus, and we decided to focus on people who are actually creating a community through their webcams. And what we found was that the type of connections people make through webcams are very different than the connections they make in face to face conversations. They experience their relationships differently, and likewise they experience themselves differently.

A classroom can also be seen as a medium, and can be analyzed in the same way. As Marshall McLuhan famously noted, "The medium is the message." and regardless of what content we might deliver in our classrooms, there is another more powerful message being sent through the very environment we have created.

The message of a room like this, or like the ones in which I teach is pretty clear. A room like this says that to learn is to acquire information, that information is scarce and hard to find, that you should trust authority for good information, and that authorised information is beyond discussion. In sum, a room like this says "obey the authority and follow along," not exactly the messages that we want to be sending to prepare our students for the world.

Contrast these messages with the trends that we all see happening all around us. We all recognize that we are heading towards ubiquitous networks, ubiquitous computing, ubiquitous information at unlimited speed about everything, everywhere on all kinds of devices. Such trends make our fill-in-the-bubble exams look ridiculous. We have

to move beyond making our students just knowledgeable and move them towards being more knowledge-*able*; able to find, analyse, criticise, question, and create information and knowledge.

There's a really good test for whether or not you are teaching knowledge-ability. Pay attention to the questions your students ask. You know things are not working when you receive questions like "How many points is this worth?" "How long does this paper need to be?" "What do we need to know for this test?" A good question is the gateway to learning. A student with a good question will go on learning without you, passionately in pursuit of answers to the question. That's what makes the questions I've listed here so disheartening. These are situations in which students are trying to limit their own learning. It's as if they are asking "How much do I need to learn, because I don't want to learn too much?"

Many of us are hopeful that social media can help answer the call for better learning environments. But consider this quote:

"The inventor of the system deserves to be ranked among the best contributors to learning and science, if not among the greatest benefactors of mankind"

It seems to really capture the ethos of our times, but this is Josiah Bumstead in 1841, talking about the benefits of the chalkboard.

There is a long history of people claiming the latest technology as the cure-all revolution for our schools. Here is another one:

"Books will soon be obsolete in schools, our school system will be completely changed in the next ten years." That's Thomas Eddison, 1913 on the benefits of the motion picture. And one more:

"All this will bring about profound change in education, we'll stop training individuals to be teachers. The problems teachers address are going out the historical window forever in the next decade." That's Buckminster Fuller, 1962. He was talking about two-way TV, which was an ingenious idea because he essentially imagined the Internet.

But for some reason, things still haven't changed. And I'll give you one last example and I think is especially really relevant. And that is, if you look at this room, there's actually a piece of very disruptive technology in this room, and it's not the laptop or cellphone. It came before both of those. It's that big projector in the back. If you think what about that projector is, it's 786,432 points of light that are connected to those 1.4 billion people who are all connecting around the planet. So if you think about what you can do with 786,432 points of light that's connected to the entire body of human knowledge in some way, the possibilities are endless. And yet what do professors tend to do with it? PowerPoint. And PowerPoint is often used to enforce and even magnify bad teaching. It helps presenters remember their notes while often doing great harm to the presentation. It encourages students to memorise key points, to let the professor decide which point should be key, and for students to regurgitate these key points on exams. PowerPoint is great for "teachers", people who want to

deliver information. But it's ultimately bad for learners and I think bad for learning when used in these ways.

So I would like to suggest that social media is not in itself the answer either. It might also be used to magnify bad teaching. And in fact it enters the classroom mostly as a disruption, as students continue to facebook through their classes.

Fortunately, such instances allow us to see the problem in a new way, and more clearly than ever, if we are willing to pay attention to what they are really saying.

Facebooking in class tells us, first of all, that despite appearances, our classrooms have been fundamentally changed. They tell us that our walls no longer mark the boundaries of our classrooms.

And that's what has been wrong all along. Some time ago we started taking our walls too seriously – not just the walls of our classrooms, but also the metaphorical walls that we have constructed around our “subjects,” “disciplines,” and “courses.”

McLuhan's statement about the bewildered child confronting “the education establishment where information is scarce but ordered and structured by fragmented, classified patterns, subjects, and schedules” still holds true in most classrooms today. The walls have become so prominent that they are even reflected in our language, so that today there is something called “the real world” which is foreign and set apart from our schools. When somebody asks a question that seems irrelevant to this real world, we say that it is “merely academic.”

Not surprisingly, our students struggle to find meaning and significance inside these walls. They tune out of class, and log on to Facebook.

Fortunately, the solution is simple. We don't have to tear the walls down. We just have to stop pretending that the walls separate us from the world, and begin working with students in the pursuit of answers to real and relevant questions.

When we do that we can stop denying the fact that we are enveloped in a cloud of ubiquitous digital information where the nature and dynamics of knowledge have shifted. We can acknowledge that most of our students have powerful devices on them that give them instant and constant access to this cloud (including almost any answer to almost any multiple choice question you can imagine). We can welcome laptops, cell phones, and iPods into our classrooms, not as distractions, but as powerful learning technologies. We can use them in ways that empower and engage students in real world problems and activities, leveraging the enormous potentials of the digital media environment that now surrounds us. In the process, we allow students to develop much-needed skills in navigating and harnessing this new media environment, including the wisdom to know when to turn it off. When students are engaged in projects that are meaningful and important to them, and that make them feel meaningful and important, they will enthusiastically turn off their cellphones and laptops to grapple with the most difficult texts and take on the most rigorous tasks.

Our own experiments may be taken as evidence. We build wikis, blogs, and platforms to allow our classes to work together, but it is not the platform that makes it work. It is the purpose that makes it work. And the best part about metaphorically tearing the walls down and finding a real purpose for our work, is that students stop asking “What do I need to know for this (fill-in-the-bubble) test?” and start asking the much more important question, “What do I need to know for this test (of my life)?”

My hope is that we can build our classrooms on a foundation of relevance and purpose so that we can move beyond the 1960s version of “Whatever ... I don't care.” and beyond the 1990s version of “Whatever ... You don't matter to me” to build a new future in which our students might say, “I care. Let's do whatever it takes, by whatever means necessary.”

(applause)