The following excerpt is based on a phone interview conducted by Gerry Bayne, EDUCAUSE multimedia producer. To listen to the full podcast, go to <http://www.educause.edu/cr/WeschInterview>.

Gerry Bayne: You have become known for your videos on technology, education, and information (http://mediatedcultures.net/mediatedculture.htm). Do you think your video and social networking experiments are going to remain complementary to your written research? Or do you think they will become credible research articles in themselves? What do you think of the future of multimedia in scholarly publishing?

Michael Wesch: Just in the last two years, I've seen a tremendous rise in the credibility of my video work—in the sense that it gets engaged on a deeper level, over time, and that's been really rewarding. Even though video does often have to coexist with the written word, I think it is becoming more respectable across the disciplines. There are now sites—for example, science journals—that are encouraging short video summaries of the main results. Video is perfect for scientific experimentation, where you can show the video of the experiments being performed. I think we are going to see more of that happening.

Bayne: Visualization of data is going to become more prevalent?

Wesch: Yes. I think, though, that the more exciting thing is that video is really a different language from writing. As somebody who practices both, I can sense that it brings out different insights, depending on which medium you're working in, which one you're working toward. So if I approach a project thinking of trying to create a visual of it, I think through the issues in a very different way. That's exciting for expanding our discourse, not just in terms of who we reach but also in terms of the types of insights we come to. Thinking visually is a very powerful method. If you've been stuck in texts for a long time—and we all, as scholars, have engaged in texts quite a bit—it's exciting to step out and think in this new language.

Bayne: Even though filmmaking has been around for decades, it seems that in terms of preparing students for digital fluency, we're in the infancy of digital storytelling.

Wesch: Definitely. There are so many ways to state that we're just in the infancy. The obvious one is that the technology itself is becoming much easier to use and more widely available. I've been editing video for quite a while. When I started, it would take days to do what it takes me just seconds to do now—something as simple as panning and zooming and adding this effect here and layering and that kind of stuff. This really opens up your creativity to explore and try all these different techniques and ways of expressing yourself. That's where it gets exciting.

Bayne: You are one of the most active practitioners of teaching in the cloud. How can teaching in the cloud foster collaborative learning and collective intelligence?

Wesch: I often like to think of the quote from Kevin Kelly, who says: “Nobody is smarter than I am alone. Then the goal becomes trying to somehow harness all of that. And I think I've finally found the secret sauce.” It basically comes down to approaching the students as collaborators, co-producers, co-researchers, or whatever you want to call them—but not as students. So you take away that hierarchy.

I still maintain that I'm the most experienced in the bunch—the expert learner, the expert researcher. But the students also have skills to bring to the table, and it's important to recognize those. Doing so facilitates a feeling of empowerment among them. I try to harness that from the very beginning, pointing out to them that whatever we do is going to contribute to the real world. We're not just going to be hiding behind the classroom walls and doing our own thing.

We start to brainstorm together: “What does the world need from us? What can we do?” Given the topic at hand, we start mining the literature, trying to find holes in the literature or debates in the literature, things that we can help resolve, some way that we can contribute to the discourse. The main point is that we do it. It's all about the doing of it. While we're doing this, while we're going out and researching together and learning together, it's almost as if the learning happens accidentally.

It struck me the other day when we were in class: we spent the whole class, like we do every class, on the edge of our seats; everybody was leaning forward, brain-
storming, trying to solve various problems in our current project. Everybody is deeply engaged in all of it. And at the end of the class, somebody mentioned: “Isn’t it funny that we get three credits for this?” I go into this classroom thinking: “This is an exciting research group. We’re doing really exciting research right now.” It is a class, but you almost forget that it’s a class.

Bayne: That speaks to a certain sort of naturalism.

Wesch: That’s exactly what it’s about, right? When it’s completely real and relevant and when what we’re doing matters, the learning becomes authentic and natural. It’s so much fun to do that. It creates an environment in which the students themselves are thinking about harnessing collective intelligence, because they also recognize their peers as collaborators.

Bayne: Your students tend to work in groups a lot, working as a team. How do you assess individual students?

Wesch: To me, the art of encouraging collaboration is like trying to find that balance between assigning individual responsibility and also finding a way to leverage all the individual contributions in a way that the endpoint is greater than the sum of its parts. The way I do that—sort of the secret behind it all—is that even though it looks like group work, every student has his or her own, very specific role and assignment in that group. A lot of that is self-constructed, so that the students are developing their own project within the larger project. That self-guided piece creates more motivation and also ultimately creates a better product, because they know better than I do what their expertise is and how they can contribute.

In all of my projects, there is an individually graded piece. Every student keeps his or her own research blog. All of those blogs are aggregated into a single feed that anybody can check out. It becomes like a learning diary. I can see what they’ve learned and what they’ve contributed over time. It’s the same on the wiki: the wiki is a collaborative tool, but the wiki also tracks exactly what every individual contributes.

The final video project that we create will be a fifty-minute documentary, but it will be made up of sixteen projects, each one of which will be about five minutes long. Each will be individually graded. Then I’ll pick the best or the most relevant to create the final fifty-minute documentary. So every student walks an individual path while at the same time contributing to the whole.

Bayne: In an age of belt tightening, how do you see teaching and learning reacting to the shift in economics? Does a lack of funding encourage or discourage innovation?

Wesch: People I’ve talked to around campus, in just about every department, are worried about cuts and what might happen. This creates an immediate desire to make your program look better than the others, so that you’re not the one who gets cut. If we’re talking at the faculty level, what are faculty doing to address the budget crunch? I would say the first thing they’re doing is trying to make themselves and their department look good. That is playing out, in some ways, in a race for majors, because the more majors your department has, the safer you are if you’re concerned about your department being cut.

The upside is that this forces us to become more student-centered. The most successful departments will be those that do this in a way that’s not crude or cheap. Often, the idea of catering to students leads to “edutainment”—the lowest, crudest form of entertainment disguised as education. The reality is that most students see right through that stuff. They want a good education.

My hope is that a focus on students will create a trend in which educators recognize students as mature and capable judges of the quality of their education. And I hope educators will adapt in a way that creates a better learning environment, one that gets students excited and gets them involved. This idea of regaining a sense of purpose in education would be the best-case scenario.

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