Life101: A Q&A with Michael Wesch

Michael Wesch has long been a leader in changing the ways we view teaching and learning. He converts large lecture halls into active, team- and game-based learning environments, and his digital ethnography courses co-create projects that can transform the lives of students and the communities with which they engage. In August, Wesch rolled out his newest project, Life101.audio (“Real Stories about Real Students Seeking a Real Education”). This podcast series seeks to renew one of the essential aspects of education: opening up to and embracing the “quest” for learning that focuses on discovery and on the connections between intellectual, affective, real-world, and personal curiosity. The approach that Mike takes to improve education goes against some current trends, which reduce learning to measuring “mastery” of information. His work continues to remind us to broaden, rather than narrow, what our learning outcomes should encourage for students (and faculty). As my work as this year’s editor of the EDUCAUSE Review New Horizons column comes to a close, I am delighted to feature a brief Q&A with Mike about the Life101.audio project.

—Shelli Fowler, Interim Dean, University College, and Director of the Bachelor of Interdisciplinary Studies, Virginia Commonwealth University

Fowler: You’ve been exploring a “participatory” praxis that challenges you and your students (and all of us who teach and work with students) to explore new and uncomfortable learning challenges and then to narrate and share those experiences.1 You suggest that doing so helps us remember and relearn how to open ourselves up and conquer the fears and doubts that obstruct what you call “real education.” What is the idea behind your latest project, Life101.audio, and what impact is it having on your approach to teaching and learning?

Wesch: Life101.audio, a storytelling podcast similar to This American Life, focuses on student life. To produce the stories, I have been immersing myself in the lives of my students, not only Snapchatting, Yik Yakking, and Tweeting but also going to parties, dancing at bars after midnight, or just hanging out at the dorms. Participation is the essence of anthropology. We don’t learn about a culture by simply observing it; we have to immerse ourselves in a culture to really understand it from the native point of view. My basic methodology is to go out with students and then follow up with in-depth interviews. For example, in Episode 1 (“Professor’s Night Out”), I go to a frat party and bump into a couple who were meeting for the first time. I interviewed them three months later to produce a segment about the challenges of starting a relationship. I also met a Chinese international student who taught me how to dance. I connected with him a few weeks later to produce a story about his journey to Kansas and worked that into the story of his teaching me how to dance. All of these stories come together in each episode so that Life101.audio becomes a series of stories that I come across as I do my research into college life.

Fowler: Many faculty and IT professionals are concerned about the increasing drive to narrowly quantify postsecondary learning. In your initial Life101.audio podcast, you make a distinction between different types of student learning outcomes (SLOs): those that are “measured” through multiple-choice exams and those that might better indicate the depth, breadth, and impact of learning. How does your new project attempt to reach beyond traditional, normative assumptions about what is at the heart of education?

Wesch: My first night of research, which is featured in Episode 1, was a real eye-opener for me. I had been invited out by a group of students to climb buildings—a risky endeavor in which you have to dodge campus security while doing a series of parkour moves up fire escapes, railings, ladders, and ledges to make your way to the top of campus buildings. I was amazed at how passionate and intensively these students were pursuing this goal. And I realized that if we could somehow nurture that same kind of passion in the classroom, grades would be irrelevant. The students were, in fact, testing themselves. They were testing their courage, their skill, and their determination. And they will continue to test themselves—over and over again. If we could somehow create learning outcomes worth pursuing, we might get the same kind of engagement.

Unfortunately, while SLOs are a very well-intentioned invention and hold the potential to transform learning, they are often encountered by faculty as an imposition from above and as, at best, a bureaucratic necessity or, at worst, an Orwellian surveillance mechanism to monitor faculty performance. As a result, many SLOs are written to ensure that they are easily measured and easily accomplished within the time frame of the course. Meanwhile, most of us have much more profound goals that go unexpressed and are often
Fowler: Your Life101.audio project embraces the difficult question about how we must transform our approach to teaching and learning so that the way we view and interact with our students is radically different from what it is now. Institutions of higher education, though, rarely encourage faculty (who often feel disconnected from contemporary learners) to bridge the gap in the ways you are willing to do. You express the perfect Freirean balance of teaching and learning roles when you say about Jordan Thomas, your former student, that over time it became increasingly unclear “who was the student and who was the teacher.” How can the IT and learning technology communities in higher education support and help foster the kind of exploratory pedagogy and transformative learning (for students and faculty) that Life101.audio represents?

Wesch: We are at a critical crossroads in education technology, and the direction we go depends largely on how we think about education. If we think about education as the learning of bits of information, we will build highly sophisticated mechanisms for delivering these bits and assessing whether or not the bits have been learned. This has largely been the path of adaptive learning platforms and the promise of algorithmic “personalized learning” systems. The algorithms used in these programs are not epistemologically neutral. They require knowledge to be defined in terms of bits that can be easily delivered and assessed. Jose Ferreira, CEO of Knewton, calls the bits “atomic concepts.” These concepts are then arranged into a larger structure in such a way that the student must master certain basic facts before proceeding onto higher-level ones. Seymour Papert calls this the “cathedral model for education,” noting that the curriculum designer “is cast in the role of a ‘knowledge architect’ who will specify a plan, a tight program, for the placement of ‘knowledge bricks’ in children’s minds.” Sal Khan’s attempt to create a Knowledge Map spanning across virtually all disciplines is perhaps the most rigorous manifestation of the model.

There are many problems with this epistemology. First, it sees the user as a version of itself—a computer operating with pure logic and a programmed-in motivation to learn the material. Of course, real students are not like that at all. They are deeply enmeshed in a field of relationships. They represent a vast variety of beliefs, ideas, ideals, and values. Second, and most importantly, students are primarily meaning-seeking individuals, not information-seeking automatons.

This is not to say that algorithms do not have a role in education. These technologies have great potential and will serve learners very well at different stages in their journeys. We just have to make sure that we don’t allow the technology to seduce us into thinking that these algorithms represent the ultimate goal of education.

My hope is that the stories I tell in Life101.audio are a constant reminder of what a real education looks like. Much of what it takes to think critically or creatively or to solve complex problems is embedded in hard-earned character traits like the capacity to overcome doubt, embrace fear, or be comfortable in ambiguity. These are earned through practice, and practice is best when it occurs in a community of like-minded, passionate people. We need to make sure that we continue to build the technology and infrastructure for that kind of practice and community.

Notes
1. For an example of a student project, see Jordan Thomas and Kenzie Wade, “To Live in This World,” Digital Ethnography Class, June 20, 2014, YouTube.

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