Google Chat for Delivering E-learning Lessons:
Transcript of Google Chat Between Paul Signorelli
And Students in Michael Wilder's "Interactive Media Design"
(Digital Journalism) Class
University of Nevada, Las Vegas
October 13, 2009

The following transcript, including pre-lesson exchanges, documents a successful experiment in delivering a live online learning experience for journalism students who were interested in learning how they could use Google Chat or other online chat tools to conduct interviews for use in articles for publication. (The live portion began at 10:05; comments from 9:01 to 9:58 am provide a back-of-house look at set-up with instructor Michael Wilder.)

A brief summary of how the session was planned, organized, and delivered is available on the Building Creative Bridges blog at

http://buildingcreativebridges.wordpress.com/?s=michael+wilder

9:01 AM m1ch43lw1ld3r: Hi, Paul. We still on for this morning?
9:02 AM me: Yes. Have my notes prepared--they'll probably take three to five minutes to relay in the form of brief chat entries, then we'll go live for questions. Have just been reviewing the course blog again, and have to say how wonderful I think it is. Kudos on putting together such a great course.
9:03 AM m1ch43lw1ld3r: Thank you, Paul. The students are doing a wonderful job. I've been reading their latest blog posts and have been impressed.
 me: Being of a mind to have back-up plans behind back-up plans, I'm wondering whether you want to have the "lecture notes" ahead of time in case we hit tech problems. It's raining pretty heavily here, so there's always the very slight chance that we'll have a power outage, but I don't think it's going to come to that.
9:04 AM m1ch43lw1ld3r: Not a problem. I have a full days worth of presentation and interaction ready for them.
9:05 AM me: Great; then I think we're set. I'll send the notes as an email attachment and check back in with you in around 45 minutes.
 m1ch43lw1ld3r: Sounds great! Thanks again!
9:06 AM I'll probably need about 5-10 minutes to get the class settled before we begin.
 me: That's fine; I'll be doing other things at my desk until you tell me we're live and set to go.

m1ch43lw1ld3r: Okay. Again, I really appreciate your time.
9:07 AM me: Glad to do it...and it's clearly a great learning opp for me, too.
 m1ch43lw1ld3r: ;-) I'm glad.
  As I mentioned, I don't think you'll need more than 20-30 minutes...unless you'd like more time.
9:08 AM me: I'm counting on you to be the man with the hook and tell me when you're ready to move on to other things; I've left the entire period free in case things really become lively.
 m1ch43lw1ld3r: Ha! Okay...will do.
9:09 AM We'll see how many questions we can get out of the students.
 me: Going back to one last read-through of the notes; you should have them in a few minutes. See you at the beginning of the session.
9:10 AM m1ch43lw1ld3r: Roger! Over and out!

45 minutes

9:55 AM me: Checking in to be sure we're live. Don't hesitate to let me know when you're ready to proceed.
9:57 AM m1ch43lw1ld3r: Hi, Paul. We're all set. Please give us a few more minutes to get settled? I'll introduce you...
9:58 AM me: Great; no need to rush; I'm already setting up the first two comments so it moves quickly when you're ready to begin.

7 minutes

10:05 AM m1ch43lw1ld3r: Good morning, Paul. Thank you so much for joining us today.
10:06 AM I've just introduced you.
 me: Good morning; hope everyone is well.
 m1ch43lw1ld3r: We are all well. A little groggy, I think.
 me: Responding to your request, I'm going to a build a bit off of the September 29, 2009 posting on your class blog ("The use of instant messaging to conduct interviews").
10:07 AM I'm going to use Google Chat in two ways…
  For the next three to five minutes, to briefly summarize how I conduct interviews via online chats for a variety of purposes—a book I'm co-writing with a colleague who is roughly 3,000 miles away from where I live; magazine articles like the 3,500-word piece that the e-Learning Guild just published in their online magazine yesterday; and, occasionally, for pieces published (sometimes for pay) on blogs—and…
  To show, through our time together, how it works, what to expect, and how to use it to your advantage.
  Let's start with a few basics about how it works; you'll already notice that these initial comments are appearing very quickly, which either means…
10:08 AM I type at the speed of light (which I do, by the way; around 80-85 words per minute), or…

I'm starting with a prepared script before going live, cutting and pasting pieces of the script into the chat as appropriate, then responding more spontaneously to the questions and comments you're going to present once we really get going.

   That quick demo of typing just a line or two, hitting the return/send key, and then moving to the next line, shows one way of keeping your interview subjects engaged. The next part of this intro will work with the slightly longer chunks of text that are more common once an interview is underway.

10:09 AM Please keep in mind that if you're ready to send a follow-up question or comment as soon as the interviewee has posted a response, things move very quickly from the interviewee's point of view. The first tip, therefore, is: have your basic questions ready before you begin the interview, and be ready to do follow-up questions as quickly as you can. It's an engaging and productive way to work.

   A second tip is to use the down time—that period while your interviewee is preparing and typing a response—to reread previous portions of the chat transcript—to develop follow-up questions and seek clarification for anything that wasn't absolutely clear in the interviewee's responses.

10:10 AM The reality of the situation is that there will be pauses and delays in your exchanges--like the one I just intentionally interjected here. That's OK. Here's a standard caveat I offer interviewees who are new to the process of online chat interviews, and I'll give you a moment to read through this before I continue with my introduction:

You and I will probably experience some delays as we think/respond during this online session. Please don't feel pressured to respond quickly during our time online together. I'll use any down time to review what's already been written so I can prep follow-up questions.

Please don't worry about spelling; I can clean that up when I start pulling material from the chat for the book, and I can check back with you if anything needs clarification.

When you sense that we're running out of time--if I don't notice--please don't hesitate to give me a five-minute warning so I don't miss anything important.
 m1ch43lw1ld3r: Wonderful tips! We really appreciate them!
10:11 AM me: Glad to present them; I'll wait about another 30 seconds before bombarding you with the next part.
 m1ch43lw1ld3r: Go for it!
  I'm asking the students to prepare questions.
 me: Another very important part of the online chat interview process is to document what you're doing so there can be no misunderstanding. Here's an introduction I've been using for the book I'm co-writing:

A few up-front caveats/disclaimers to be sure we're on the same virtual page: the primary purpose for this chat/interview is to gather information for Are You Following Me?, the book which Lori Reed and I are writing for ALA Editions. Sections of the book may appear as separate articles in magazines if we are really lucky.

10:12 AM I've also learned to tell first-time interviewees the following so they aren't overly nervous about catching every possible typo before hitting return/send to provide a response: Please don't worry about spelling; I can clean that up when I start pulling material from the chat for the book, and I can check back with you if anything needs clarification.

One basic bit of journalism to keep in mind—we need to get the facts right from the beginning. Even if I know someone very well, I ask a variation of the following so it becomes part of the chat/interview transcript:

Can you type in your name, current title, name of the library where you work, and how long you've been there so I have it all in one place?

Then I move into the first question, and while the interviewee is responding, I'm looking over the next question and pasting it into the chat box so I can send it as soon as it's appropriate to do so.

10:13 AM One more point, then let's move into our own live exchange based on questions you have so you can have the experience of seeing how quickly and how slowly this sometimes can be.

I adore chat as an interview technique because it leaves me and the interviewee with a transcript as soon as the interview is over—an idea discussed in that class blog posting, "The use of instant messaging to conduct interviews." No more worries about people claiming they were misquoted, no more hours of transcribing recordings or trying to read illegible notes.

An important tip that, coincidentally, supports something on your course schedule this week: make back-up copies of the chat interview as soon as it is over, and store it on your hard drive and on a flash drive so that if something goes wrong with the online version, you haven't lost important material.

That's my intro; let's go live. What would you like to know about the process of using Google Chat, Yahoo Messenger, Skype's chat function, or other variations to conduct your interviews?

10:15 AM m1ch43lw1ld3r: On Skype there's no way to record directly. How do you capture your audio portions? (From Janelle)

10:16 AM me: I haven't worked with audio at all in this format; seems it would present the same frustrations that face-to-face sessions present--you jot down notes, have to transcribe them, and fight against your own bad handwriting. On the other hand...

10:17 AM because I do type quickly, I routinely conduct interviews by phone (and Skype would work as well) and transcribe what is being said as it is being said. If I fall behind, I read back what I have and the interviewee fills in the gaps. Also very good, but not as easy as chat.

An afterthought: when I referred to Skype, I was referring to Skype' chat function; you simply cut and paste the transcript into a Word Doc as soon as you're finished.

10:18 AM m1ch43lw1ld3r: Great!

Is it necessary to maintain proper punctuation, grammar and spelling in a chat format? (From Jessica)

10:19 AM me: That can really kill an interview. When I'm typing--as you're seeing--I quickly skim and catch what I can, but I encourage interviewees to concentrate on content, not format, as long as what they're saying/writing accurately reflects their thoughts.

10:20 AM A key here is to remind interviewees that you're seeking natural-sounding (conversational) English, not a Master's thesis.

m1ch43lw1ld3r: Have you noticed a difference in the way interviewees respond through different mediums? Is one better than another? Do you miss any non-verbal cues? (From Carsla and Danielle)

10:21 AM me: 1) I've noticed a tremendous differece in the way first-time interviewees respond online as opposed to in a face-to-face context. When they become more familiar with online chat--and it happens quickly--they loosen up.

10:22 AM 2) I don't have strong feelings that one works better than another beyond what I've already said here. A nice thing for most interviewees is that the chat format slows them down slightly and inspires somewhat more thoughtful answers--but that's not always true.

10:23 AM 3) I absolutely do miss some of the non-verbal cues that are available face-to-face, and would highly recommend that you all read some of the work out there on body language so you're aware of what you're facing (or, in an online context, literally not facing). A big tip: you have to be very careful in the online written context with the words you choose, and develop a strong sense of watching for the possibility of miscommunication. It becomes easier with experience.

10:25 AM On the theme of body language: Joe Navarro's book, *What Every Body Is Saying*, is fabulous source material. Lots of pictures and great text.

10:26 AM m1ch43lw1ld3r: How long do you wait for the interviewee to pause before you pose the next question?

10:28 AM me: I have no hard and fast rules. Pauses can range from three to five minutes, and I had one extreme case where a particularly cautious interviewee took 30 minutes to prepare one response. I'll often ask an interviewee if he or she has anything else to add, and one technique that works well is to ask the interviewee to simply type "done" when the person is ready for another question; that gives more thoughtful interviewees the ability to not rush through an answer.

Another key here: remember that the point is to get the best information and quotes you can; that means your interviewee has to be comfortable--the opposite of being rushed.

10:30 AM m1ch43lw1ld3r: Nice. Ready for the next question?

Would you like to say "done" when you've finished a question?

me: Yes!

m1ch43lw1ld3r: Do you dress up for online interviews?

me: It's never come up. As you cn see, I'm rarely done.

10:31 AM ...make that "As you can see..." and please note this is a great technique for you and interviewees to correct mistakes as you go. As for dressing up for online interviews: doesn't everybody?

10:33 AM A more serious answer to the dress-up question is: there actually is something basic about taking your work seriously. If you find that dressing up does make you more serious, it's worth pursuing. I'm not one of those writers who sits around at home in pajamas; when I'm ready to work, I'm dressed comfortably but in a fashion which reminds me that I'm at work. I'll stop there for fear of oversharing.

m1ch43lw1ld3r: Understood!

Next question:

10:34 AM If you correct someone's responses, could someone interpret that as misquoting? (from Ryan)

 me: That is a great question and one with a couple of repercussions:

10:35 AM 1) If you're putting words within quotation marks, there really should be no "correcting" unless you've checked with the source to be sure that the words reflect what the source intended to say.

10:36 AM 2) None of us quotes every word a source utters;summary is a key element to journalism, so the idea of "correcting" can imply that you don't use a source's exact words, but you capture with 100 percent accuracy what the source was saying....

10:38 AM 3) If someone says or writes five sentences, and the gist of what they are saying rests in the first and final sentences, you simply note the editing as follows: "If someone says or writes five sentences...you simply note the editing..." you've used to capture their thoughts.

10:39 AM m1ch43lw1ld3r: Five minute warning!

  What's a quick tip to create rapport with your interviewee in online chat? (from Ani)

10:40 AM me: Thanks for the warning. Responding to Ani's question: lots of that happens in the process of setting up the interview. I'll have email or phone exchanges before the chat interview to be sure it's going to be productive. That doesn't always work; in one recent nightmare scenario, I had email exchanges with a source in another country over an eight-week period, and ultimately discovered that the source was useless for the story I was writing.

10:42 AM m1ch43lw1ld3r: Renata: Do you feel people sometimes are reluctant to engage in an online chat fearing it will take too long?

10:43 AM me: That hasn't been a problem. I generally give them an estimate of how much time I'll need (good interviews generally run about an hour), and if I see that we're nearing the end of the alloted time, ask them if they want to continue, reschedule a follow-up, or simply end as planned. Most people are engaged enough to either continue to conclusion or schedule a follow-up session.

10:44 AM m1ch43lw1ld3r: We have two more questions, if that's alright.

 me: The thing to remember is that a successful interview gives you great source material, and I believe my interviewees understand that.

10:45 AM Yes, let's keep going...and I'm impressed to see how quickly everyone is falling into the patterns I've been describing. There really is no magic here, just common sense and respect for the interviewee's time.

 m1ch43lw1ld3r: Is it possible to include images in a chat format (either for the interviewer or interviewee)? (from Nicole)

10:46 AM me: I haven't tried to include images in a chat format, but providing links via URLs would be one way to approach that situation. I routinely--as you saw at the beginning of this exchange--share URLs to speed things along.

10:48 AM I've also sent emails with attachments while a chat is underwa; that's another way to transfer images. And it's worth mentioning that I routinely keep a couple of onscreen windows open to facilitate the interview process. I keep the chat running down the right side of my screen and an open browser on the left so I can look up sites while an interviewee is typing a response.

 m1ch43lw1ld3r: Last question (from Ani): Do you ever use IMspeak (such as "LOL," :-) , "OMG")

10:50 AM me: I'm far from proficient in it, so don't use it much at all. I also feel it interjects a level of informality which isn't appropriate to the work I'm doing. On the other hand, if it works for you, why avoid it? What it comes down to is, if you're writing for a mainstream publication with very formal standards, you want to encourage interviewees to respond at that level so you'll end up with usable material.

10:51 AM OMG, have we reached the final question?:-)

10:52 AM m1ch43lw1ld3r: Yes! Ha!

Thank you so much! That was wonderful!

We sincerely appreciate your time!

10:53 AM me: Thank you. Hope all of you find ways to go far beyond what I'm accomplishing, and respond by teaching me whatever you discover. Really enjoyed the opportunity to meet with you in this format and attempt a mini-lecture via Google Chat.

10:55 AM m1ch43lw1ld3r: We enjoyed your insight as well. I believe we could have continued for quite a bit longer...but we wanted to be considerate of your time. The students are appreciative. They'll be posting comments on the blog post on our site later.

10:56 AM me: Looking forward to reading them.

m1ch43lw1ld3r: Okay...thank you so much, Paul. Keep in touch, alright?

10:57 AM me: Will do; moving on to the next assignment on my desk--not nearly as much fun as this was, mind you, but challenging none the less.

m1ch43lw1ld3r: Ha! Good luck!

me: Thanks. And, following what we discussed a few minutes ago, here's the final work as I leave: done!

10:58 AM ...make that "final word"...

Done!

m1ch43lw1ld3r: Will do!