

The Flash Mob Project: Literacy, New Literacy, and Dancing

Introduction

The ubiquity of internet usage has ushered in a cultural situation in which participation in online spaces is both influencing and is influenced by what was previously understood to be “real” culture. Indeed, the dichotomies of virtual and face-to-face are increasingly false as the boundaries between the two become less and less distinct (Leander, 2008). Part of this dissolution can be credited to the widespread usage of social networks such as facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, which invite the recreation of an individual’s network of friends, family and acquaintance, all while exposing and expanding those networks to include interactions with what previously was defined as a stranger. Relationships are begun and fostered entirely online in these spaces.

Within this context of a blended online/offline life, the affordances of instant and viral communication have led to the rise in what Howard Rheingold (2003) has dubbed the “smart mob.” One iteration of this phenomenon is the meme of the flash mob. According to Wikipedia:

A flash mob (or flashmob) is a large group of people who assemble suddenly in a public place, perform an unusual or pointless act for a brief time, then disperse. The term flash mob is generally applied only to gatherings organized via telecommunications, social media, or viral emails (Wikipedia, 2010).

It is through the utilization of the affordances of social media as well as the comfort of young people with the idea of participatory culture that a flash mob is able to be conceived, organized, and implemented. The flash mob relies not only on the culture’s openness to such an event, but also on connected, literate individuals to spread the message and ultimately participate in the event. The final layer of the participation comes after the flash mob occurs in the viral nature of the posted video of the event, which arguably has the greater impact than the event itself. While at most a few hundred people might witness the flash mob in real time, the re-viewing of the event, possible via video sharing sites like YouTube, results in a substantially larger potential audience.

What happens when a flash mob is conceived and implemented? What conditions need to exist for a flash mob to occur? And in what ways are new literacies employed in the course of the implementation?

Context

The flash mob was conceived and implemented on the campus of a large state University. The information about the flash mob was spread through the author’s Twitter account, as well as through a facebook event page established by the author. Finally, various University department listservs were a vehicle for spreading information about participation in the flash mob.

Additionally, the flash mob itself was scheduled to take place in conjunction with the National Day on Writing. According to the National Council of Teachers of English, who help coordinate the National Day on Writing, the day was conceived to

...draw attention to the remarkable variety of writing we engage in, and to help writers from all walks of life recognize how important writing is to their lives, **October 20, 2010**, will be celebrated as The National Day on Writing. **The National Day on Writing will**

- celebrate the foundational place of writing in Americans' personal, professional, and civic lives.
- point to the importance of writing instruction and practice at every grade level, for every student and in every subject area from preschool through university.
- emphasize the lifelong process of learning to write and composing for different audiences, purposes, and occasions.
- recognize the scope and range of writing done by the American people and others. honor the use of the full range of media for composing.
- encourage Americans to write and enjoy and learn from the writing of others.

While flash mobs were originally conceived as a purposeless activity, flash mob organizers, though perhaps unaffiliated with a particular organization, have often taken up a political or social cause and used the flash mob as a vehicle for raising awareness. There are myriad examples of this aspect of the meme on YouTube. It was in this implementation that this particular flash mob was conceived and wedded to the National Day on Writing. Additionally, it was of interest to the author to explore notions of the community as a text itself and to identify the genre features of the flash mob.

The Flash Mob experience

The author will be reporting on the results of the flash mob experience from the vantage point of participant-observer (Glasser & Strauss, 1967). Throughout the experience, three distinct phases of implementation were observed.

The Visioning Phase

First was the visioning stage. In this stage, the idea of the flash mob was conceived, researched by viewing various examples of flash mobs on YouTube, and logistical considerations were made. In this phase, the context of the flash mob, specifically the linking of the flash mob with the National Day on Writing, was established. This included determining the date, time, and physical location of the flash mob. Additionally, Jillian Tremonti was recruited to assist with the choreography. The song "Oxford Comma" by Vampire Weekend was chosen for its thematic relationship to writing.

The Organization Phase

The second stage was the organization stage. In this stage, multiple modes of communication were employed to recruit potential participants to take part in the flash mob. In order to best publicize the event, the author posted to her blog, Twitter and

facebook feeds, as well as establishing a public facebook events page. Additionally, a variety of Michigan State University listservs were sent the information, thus targeting various populations of the MSU community, including those interested in writing and dance, from undergraduates to faculty to K-12 educators associated with the University. Due to the nature of social media, the message was amplified in ways that would be difficult to track in their entirety: private facebook posts, forwarded emails, and word of mouth are all examples of the ways in which the message was spread. The facebook public events page was easiest to track: the page garnered approximately 186 invitations to participate in the flash mob, according to the page's statistics, of which approximately 30 were invited by the author.



In all of these messages, the recipients were invited to participate in one of the following ways: send the message along, commit dancing in the flash mob, commit to the act of public writing, or submit a piece of writing to the local gallery established on the National Day on Writing (<http://galleryofwriting.org/galleries/2412904>). As the message was spread, those who could not participate in the flash mob were invited to submit writing to the gallery as a virtual participant. Those viewing and participating in the live flash mob were also invited to add submissions through flyers including the link and instructions for the gallery.

In terms of the efficacy of Twitter during the recruitment phase, it is difficult to truly identify the reach of the message. One method is to multiply the followers of each account that tweets or re-tweets the information to estimate the potential audience, however, each account may or may not be one that has the geographical proximity necessary for participation in the actual event (Cha, et. al., 2010; Yang, et. al., 2010). It is therefore difficult to say with any certainty the efficacy of this method in terms of yielding actual participation. That being said, it is interesting to note that the first submission to the gallery was of a geographically removed person who had come by the link via the author's twitter feed.

During this phase of the flash mob, the National Writing Project, an organization in which the author holds membership, chose to highlight the flash mob project in their press around the ways in which local Writing Project sites planned to celebrate the National Day on Writing:

And then, as is usual with Writing Project collective activities, there will be at least a few folks on the cutting edge. For instance, Andréa Zellner of the Red Cedar Writing Project will be creating a "flash mob." For the uninitiated, a "flash mob," according to Wikipedia, is "a large group of people, who assemble suddenly in a public place to perform an unusual and pointless act for a brief time, then disperse."

The part of this definition that does not apply to what Zellner is doing is the term "pointless." The point is to get people from all over the area involved in the National Day on Writing.

Zellner says, "Those who come will be dancing in the cafeteria at Michigan State and writing on a giant paper with markers. After we all dance and/or write, I'm distributing leaflets with the Gallery information. So the whole thing both celebrates writing and serves as an elaborate writing prompt."

Zellner concludes with a sentence that could serve as the watchword for the National Day on Writing: "The community is the text." (Peterson, 2010)

Additionally, the author was interviewed on the National Writing Project's internet radio show hosted by BlogTalkRadio.

Implementation Phase

The actual day of the flash mob brought with it success and disappointments. While there had been many who had communicated their commitment to participating in the flash mob, the actual time commitment in the midst of a busy Wednesday became too much of an obstacle to participation. Choosing a time when most people are free is a difficult task. Flash mobs tend to have better execution in much larger cities. This may be due to solely to the larger population or the lessened societal constraints that come with anonymity within those large communities. This is just speculation. It is interesting to note that the participants were strangers to both the author and the choreographer and is an aspect the author would like to explore further.

The flash mob group met an hour before the performance to learn the dance and the music as well as to clarify the rest of the logistics: location, order of joining the dance. Additionally, three acquaintances of the author came to video or photograph the events of the day. Finally, the author was able to convince the staff of the International Center to allow her access to the PA system, thus allowing for a larger impact on the audience viewing the flash mob. Additional information about the execution of the flash mob, in addition to the video of the flash mob, can be found here: <http://www.andrea-zellner.com/archives/444>

Reflection

This project was undertaken entirely to explore the nature of flash mobs and how they relate to both participatory culture and new literacy. Many literacies were engaged in both the visioning and recruitment phase. The author had to consider advocating for the event to multiple audiences for multiple purposes. Additionally, the use of instant communication technologies allowed for the logistical challenges of executing this type

of event to be met. However, clearly it is one type of commitment to respond to an email or facebook invitation and quite another to appear in a face-to-face situation to engage in an activity that may result in embarrassing oneself. If one were to consider that the flash mob is a type of genre, than there also seems to be a specific type of person who is willing to engage in producing that genre. Additionally, taking into account the context (a large, land-grant University in the Midwest, generally conservative), it may be that engaging in this type of activity requires a much larger amount of social acceptance to take that risk. Unbeknownst to the author, the president of the University took on the challenge of a flash mob to be executed at the Homecoming half-time, an event that was in large part more socially sanctioned than the one the author initiated, and was met with a better response, thus lending itself to the interpretation that a flash mob requires some amount of social risk that is mediated by the peer group or larger community.

Finally, the flash mob experience also brings with it affordances that can be harnessed for educational purposes. The employment of both old and new literacies, the attention it garners for a particular cause or idea, and the use of new technologies all lend themselves to use for educational purposes. It is the author's intention to write in more detail about this aspect of the flash mob to submit for publication.

References

Cha, M., Haddadi, H., Benevenuto, F., & Gummadi, K. P. (2010). Measuring User Influence in Twitter: The Million Follower Fallacy (p. 10-17). Fourth International AAAI Conference on Weblogs and Social Media. Retrieved from <http://www.aaai.org/ocs/index.php/ICWSM/ICWSM10/paper/view/1538>

Leander, K. M. (2008). Toward a Connective Ethnography of Online/Offline Literacy Networks (p. 33-65). Erlbaum.

Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research* (p. 271). Aldine Publishing Company.

Peterson, Art (2010). NWP Sites Gear Up for the National Day on Writing. *The National Writing Project*. Retrieved from <http://www.nwp.org/cs/public/print/resource/3295>

Rheingold, H. (2003). *Smart Mobs: The Next Social Revolution*. Perseus Publishing.

Wikipedia (2010). *Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia*. Retrieved October 17, 2010, from <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flashmob>

Yang, Z., Guo, J., Cai, K., Tang, J., Li, J., Zhang, L., & Su, Z. (2010). Understanding Retweeting Behaviors in Social Networks. Retrieved from <http://keg.cs.tsinghua.edu.cn/persons/tj/publications/CIKM10-Yang-et-al-Understanding-Retweeting.pdf>