

The Educational Affordances of the Flash Mob: From Mobs to Smart Mobs

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Abstract: The flash mob, a phenomenon in which groups of people gather in a public space and perform a specific task, has gathered increasing amounts of attention both on the internet and in popular culture. This paper examines the educational affordances and possibilities of integrating this type of event into classrooms and curriculum, from primary grades through university settings. A history of flash mobs, an examination of possible educational uses, and a presentation of four case studies of flash mobs in educational environments are considered.

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 interactions 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 re-creation of an individual’s network of friends, family and acquaintances, 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 has dubbed the “smart mob.” In his seminal text on the subject, *Smart Mobs: The Next Social Revolution*, he notes:

Smart mobs consist of people who are able to act in concert even if they don’t know each other. The people who make up smart mobs cooperate in ways never before possible because they carry devices that possess both communication and computing capabilities (Rheingold, 2002, p. xii).

Because of the unprecedented ability to communicate across distance, new ways of developing community and organizing within society is the result.

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 (Flash mob, 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.

The flash mob meme has become an internet phenomenon. A search for Youtube flash mob videos yields over a hundred thousand videos, some videos garnering millions of views. The meme became so

popular it has been featured in mainstream media as well, through news coverage to Oprah's mammoth flash mob in Chicago on September 8, 2009. As educators, trends in popular culture ultimately find their way into our classrooms. Considering that this type of popular culture meme is so highly dependent on the affordances of technologies, the novelty of this particular piece of pop culture is rich in possible re-purposing as an educational and pedagogical tool.

How might the power of the flash mob be harnessed for educational uses? First, a look at the nature of flash mobs themselves. This is followed by a discussion of the educational affordances of flash mobs, the ways in which a flash mob might be re-purposed for the educational setting. Finally, we end with an examination of case studies of flash mobs in educational settings, their impact, and their outcomes.

From Flash Mob to Smart Mob: The History of the Flash Mob

The flash mob certainly has its root in art. Indeed, the power of the flash mob, an explanation for its viral replication and enthusiastic reception, might lie in the ways in which it publicizes an artistic expression and re-purposes the nature of public spaces. Viktor Shklovsky defined the signature purpose of art as allowing us feel what could not normally be felt, to convey a different sense of the world. In this way, art takes what is normally so prosaic as to be invisible (the gathering of a group in a public space) and makes it strange (the choreographed dancing). This estrangement brings with it novelty, and novelty then engenders attention.

While people have gathered in mobs for much of human history, the modern iteration of the flash mob, as we are discussing it here, is widely believed to have been initiated in the summer of 2003. *USA Today* reported on mysterious emails circulated by someone named Bill that resulted in absurd group performances in public places (Kornblum, 2003). It is known now that the mysterious coordinator was Bill Wasik, who said that flash mobs started as a kind of playful social experiment meant to encourage spontaneity and big gatherings to temporarily take over commercial and public areas simply to show that they could (Urbina, 2010; Flash mob, 2010).

Indeed, early iterations of the flash mob were derided by many in the internet community. In the smart mob usenet group, a 2003 editorial defined the distinction in this way:

But there is a distinction between "flash mobs" and "smart mobs." The first want to have fun, or to show they're Internet savvy, or whatever. On the other hand, the smartmobbers have an agenda, whether it's sociological, technological or political (admin, 2003).

The ensuing discussion there and elsewhere discussed the affordances in terms of "practicing" the power of collective action, even within the frivolity. Others dismissed flash mobs that lacked purpose as thoughtless and useless. Despite the analysis by various corners of the internet, the practice did not stop. In fact, flash mobs seemed to be showing up in all sorts of populated spaces, and each one was duly covered by local and sometimes national and international media. It was not long until activists sensed the power of the flash mob for bringing attention to particular causes, thus transitioning to the smart mob idea. It should be noted, however, that often in literature and in the media, the terms "smart mob" and "flash mob" are used interchangeably, sometimes eliding the original purposes for gathering the collective.

Educational Uses of the Smart Mob: Why a Smart Mob?

In deconstructing the educational affordances of the flash mob, it is useful to consider the social nature of learning and literacy acquisition, and the ways in which literacy acquisition can be facilitated through the examination of popular culture. Indeed, in the recently released Aspen Institute's White Paper on Digital Literacy, the author emphasizes that the pervasive role of participatory culture brings with it the requirement for new literacies in order to fully participate as citizens. They state:

These digital and media literacy competencies, which constitute core competencies of citizenship in the digital age, have enormous practical value. To be able to apply for jobs online, people need skills to find relevant information. To get relevant health information, people need to be able to distinguish between a marketing ploy for nutritional supplements and solid information based on research evidence. To take advantage of online educational opportunities, people need to have a good understanding of how knowledge is constructed and how it represents reality and articulates a point of view. For people to take social action and truly engage in actual civic activities that improve their communities, they need to feel a sense of empowerment that comes from working collaboratively to solve problems (Hobbs, 2010, p. 7).

As the National Technology Plan itself asserts, it is essential to provide students the opportunity to critically evaluate the media they consume and to create as full participants in digital communities. The flash mob, with its sense of play, dependency on communal co-construction of a product, textual literacies for dissemination of information, and execution of a large-scale event brings with it numerous opportunities for development of digital literacy skills. When a flash mob is wedded to an educational idea, the results are even more powerful. Indeed, the educational message and the purpose of the advocacy are emphasized throughout all stages of the flash mob process: the planning, the execution, and in the replaying and republishing of the products of the gathering – be it a YouTube Video, a FaceBook post, or a retweet on Twitter.

Case Study 1: Flashmob: Pregnant women break-dancing in London

Video: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cs0s_K1IIAg

In this particular iteration of the flash mob for education, the non-profit Oxfam was seeking to bring awareness to maternal health in third world countries. Through social media channels, they invited pregnant women to dance in a public park in London. Additionally, they invited professional female dancers to wear pregnancy suits as they executed very difficult break-dance moves. The end result was an almost shocking performance in which it appeared that truly pregnant women were break-dancing in the middle of a public park. The accompanying statement was,

“If you think this is dangerous, try giving birth in poor countries without a midwife, hospital or medicine. This flashmob is one of a series happening in Paris, Berlin, Utrecht and across Canada to highlight the scandal that millions of women in poor countries and around the world aren't getting the healthcare they need for a safe and healthy pregnancy (OxFamGreatBritain, 2008).”

As of this writing, the video had garnered over 800,000 views, which is a considerable amount of viewers who now, even for the briefest of moments, are thinking about maternal health in poor countries. While it is difficult to gauge the true impact of the video as it translates into action, it is clear that, in terms of education, more people are aware of the issue than prior to the execution of the flashmob.

This example, while not intended for what is generally thought of as “traditional instruction,” still demonstrates the powerful ways in which a flash mob might be used to increase learning about a particular topic. Upon viewing the very pregnant women flipping through the air, spinning on their heads, and otherwise pulling off gravity-defying feats while appearing eight months pregnant is troubling at first. This concern is then channeled by the organization, who offers a link in hopes that the viewer will be spurred to further action. In the end, the viewers are left with a stronger understanding of the very real issue of maternal health in third world countries, drawing a parallel between how difficult it might be to do break dance while pregnant and the actual physical dangers of giving birth without access to adequate health services. In this way, by demonstrating an issue in a startling, yet fun, way, Oxfam avoids the demonstrated pitfalls of “compassion fatigue” and translates the novelty of the flashmob into awareness raising and the potential for even more substantial action on the part of the viewer.

Case Study 2: Gotta Keep Reading - Ocoee Middle School

School's video: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x6D9jiEYxzs>

Oprah's video: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WwRo0iCvoYE>

In this example, an entire Middle School campus participated in the flash mob. The school was inspired by the flash mob that was executed by Oprah and the Black Eyed Peas in 2009, an event broadcast on her program that was immensely popular. The idea was the brain child of the school librarian, who secured the rights to the song. The school's band director re-wrote the lyrics to the song to reflect the importance of literacy and to encourage the students to prepare and read for the upcoming FCAT test. Smiling students are shown reading, singing and dancing while holding up their favorite books, and generally celebrating the joy of reading in the school environment.

It is striking that the flash mob was executed in the Middle School environment: studies have concluded that there remains a stubborn, precipitous drop in literacy once students move into adolescence. While it is unclear whether or not the Ocoee Middle School students were able to encourage reading in their wider internet audience, what is clear upon viewing the video is the enjoyment and group cohesion around the idea of reading that the flash mob experience engendered. It would be worth exploring how long the focus on reading remained and if there was a change in student engagement with reading as a result of the experience.

One measure of success might be in the staggering amount of videos that re-created the flash mob at their own elementary, middle, and high schools. Running a YouTube search on "Gotta Keep Reading" results in pages of copycat videos and responses from students. It can be surmised that the sheer volume of other schools that are imitating the experience of the Ocoee students speaks to the power of this particular meme and the desire on the part of educators to harness that power in order to translate to better outcomes for their students.

Case Study 3: Use of Flash Mob as Point of Inquiry

Literacy was also a concern for Philadelphia teacher John Landis. Nearly 50% of Philadelphia students do not graduate from high school, and in 2009 only about half of his students at the Russell Byers Charter School performed at or above grade level on the state proficiency exam. In these situations student learning is often dominated by more drill-and-practice reading, which is an important approach in getting elementary students to read at grade level. But according to the 2004 Carnegie report, "Reading Next: A vision for action and research in middle and high school literacy," another important consideration is reading comprehension:

"Educators must thus figure out how to ensure that every student gets beyond the basic literacy skills of the early elementary grades, to the more challenging and more rewarding literacy of the middle and secondary school years. Inevitably, this will require, for many of those students, teaching them new literacy skills: how to read purposefully, select materials that are of interest, learn from those materials, figure out the meanings of unfamiliar words, integrate new information with information previously known, resolve conflicting content in different texts, differentiate fact from opinion, and recognize the perspective of the writer—in short, they must be taught how to comprehend (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006, p.1)."

Educators like Landis and Hobbs think that media literacy education has the potential to better engage at-risk students in literacy learning. The students at the Russell Byers school learned media literacy skills by exploring the topic of flash mobs. The class chose this topic because earlier that spring the Philadelphia community had experienced a number of spontaneous and "sometimes aggressive gatherings of teenagers." Young Philadelphians were using social networking sites and text messaging to arrange large gatherings on the streets, and what turned out to be what the local district attorney labeled as dangerous, "antisocial behavior." Landis' students had heard about these events and wanted to learn more about them.

According to Emily Balin, a Pre-Doctoral Fellow and Research Associate at the Media Education Lab at Temple University's School of Communications and Theater:

"Combining digital and media literacy approaches, Mr. Landis designed learning experiences for students to practice reading comprehension, strengthen their technical skills by using a programming tool to make

interactive games, and exercise critical thinking about digital and media texts, all while wrestling with questions of ethics, accountability, and civic engagement surrounding the current events issue of flash mobs (Balin, 2010).”

As the students analyzed news stories, composed videos, and created video games, they learned that the local community, media, police, and the teenagers all made choices that affected events. The students then wrote and created media that emphasized the choices they make in their own lives.

National Day on Writing Flash mob: You, Too, Can Execute a Smart Mob

With a curiosity around the possible affordances of a flash mob, one of the authors, Andrea Zellner, took on the challenge of planning and executing an educationally-themed smart mob as a participant-observer. The flash mob (as it was named in all communications) was conceived and implemented on the campus of a large state University. The information about the flash mob was spread through the Andrea’s Twitter account, and her blog, as well as through a Facebook event page established by Andrea. 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, October 20, 2010. The National Day on Writing was conceived by the National Council of Teachers of English in order to bring attention to issues of literacy and writing education in the United States. It was for the purpose of bringing attention to these issues and the event itself that the flash mob was planned.

Reflecting on the process of executing a flash mob, from the small spark of inspiration to the nervous thrill of dancing in front of strangers, it is clear that the process is indeed an accessible one. In every complicated endeavor, there are usually a core of committed individuals who keep the forward momentum. In this case, Andrea was joined by an enthusiastic choreographer, a young woman who was both completing her Americorps service and clearly dedicated to political activism. She, too, had always wanted to participate in a flash mob. It was of interest to Andrea that all of the participants in the flash mob, including the choreographer, were initially strangers to her. While each participant came to the event by way of messages sent out by Andrea, the recipients were two or more steps removed from Andrea’s network. In hindsight, there are many complicating factors that contribute to the success of a flash mob. The University, while large, does not support the same community as a New York City or San Francisco. It would seem that the smaller the community, the smaller the flash mob. The exception is when the power structure becomes involved, as in the Ocoee school example. Additionally, feedback from those who had planned to come, but who ultimately did not attend, indicated that the lack of a common schedule among the potential participant pool (an issue on any college campus) made it difficult to execute the flash mob at a time where the public areas were heavily trafficked AND the participants were free from school or work duties to practice. In the end, the event certainly raised awareness around the National Day on Writing through the planning and recruiting phase, the actual flash mob, and the views of the video and associated blog post after the fact. The gallery of writing, sadly, did not garner many submissions, most likely due to the very cumbersome user experience associated with submission.

Conclusion

In thinking through the history of this popular movement, it is clear that the idea of a flash mob is an intriguing piece of popular culture. The speed at which the meme replicated despite the significant logistics of executing a flash mob speaks to this phenomenon. As the case studies demonstrate, the flash mob is finding its way into educational environment, bringing with it new literacies practice and engagement in its wake.

The affordances of the flash mob include employment of effective navigation of new literacy practices, increased motivation, a recognition of the cultural practices and discourses of young people, a sense of play and fun (which in turn, can foster a community of creativity). And while there is a great deal of enthusiasm around these events, it would be of interest to examine them even more fully, in order that we might quantify what anecdotal evidence suggests. Clearly, there is more work to be done.

As flash mobs continue to be utilized in both mainstream and educational environments, whether it be a critical examination of their impact on a local community or the utilization of a flash mob as an organizing tool for social change, it is useful to note that their power can, and will, be harnessed for the impactful education they provide.

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