Getting Likes, Going Viral, and the Intersections Between Popularity Metrics and Digital Composition

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Abstract

This article explores how the virality made possible by shareable content and its popularity metrics – Shares, Views, Likes, ♥'s, Tweets, etc. – influences the composition, circulation, and assessment of digital texts. As popularity metrics are increasingly linked to sharable texts, the lines between content designed to inform, inspire, and educate, and the content designed to illicit clicks, earn likes, and proliferate are blurred. Calling attention to the presence of popularity metrics, the frames of contagious content, and their respective impacts can help students (and scholars) better understand how such compositions cross between academic, personal, and professional networks. The article begins in the classroom, moves into a more theoretical analysis of the spread of educational content via platforms like Ted.com, and concludes with a discussion of a "writing viral video" assignment that I use to help undergraduate students examine the affordances and constraints of sharing their multimodal compositions and the possibility of going viral.

1. The Ambiguous Value of "Likes" and Academics Going Viral

Two classroom observations and two scholarly viral videos highlight the intersections between popularity metrics, virality, and academia that this article explores. The first observation followed a question about "likes." In order to generate discussion, transparency, and community in an upper division Multimedia Writing course at the University of California Santa Barbara, I asked that each student "follow" the individual Tumblr blogs of each classmate. An issue arose when a student asked whether or not she was also required to "like" (or "heart") her classmates' posts (the icon for "liking" on Tumblr is a ♥). She could like if she wanted, I told her, but "likes" did not matter and, I clarified, "likes" would not influence my assessment of an author's original blog post or a reader's participation grade. After further consideration, however, I brought the question to a group discussion. The consensus was that ♥'s and likes *should not, in theory* matter in an academic setting, but that they did matter outside of academia, in personal and even professional networks (albeit, as my follow up research shows, to varying degrees). Our ambivalent attitude towards the ♥'s and likes we gave and received seemed to challenge some of the overarching goals for the course—to show students that, first, due to the increasingly multimodal and participatory nature of media production and composition,

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all of our writing and sign-making gestures matter, and second, that our compositions make frequent (and sometimes unintentional) transitions between academic, personal, and professional networks. The ambiguous value of likes and popularity metrics surfaced again later in the course, when students remediated a non-fiction text as part of their "writing with video" assignment, uploaded their videos to YouTube, and posted links to their Tumblr page. I was pleased and excited that a majority of the videos went above and beyond the course requirements, but I could not help but notice that even the most exceptional videos had few "views" and almost no likes or dislikes (which on YouTube is represented by thumbs up and thumbs down). Even after the course had ended, most groups' videos had fewer than ten views. Although they were not part of the assignment's requirements or learning outcomes, the lack of "views" bothered me, for, I suspected, largely the same reasons that, for better and worse, they mattered to students. We each had some expectations regarding the "likes" or "views," but these expectations seemed conspicuously absent from my curricula. Should I have encouraged students to like one another's blog posts and videos? Should writing assignments posted to a public blog that gain a substantial number of views and likes be rewarded with higher grades? What would be the risks and rewards of encouraging students to aim for virality with their multimodal compositions?

These questions of popularity and virality inspired me to develop a "social media use and expectations" survey and a "writing viral video" assignment that are discussed in the third section of this article. Here, I want to suggest that the issues related to my specific classroom experience regarding likes and views are filtering through academia more broadly. For example, the purpose of composing this article and contributing it to a peer-reviewed journal is to share my ideas and findings with my colleagues, not the masses. Nonetheless, if the article is accepted, I will post the title and links to the abstract to my social media accounts. These posts to my personal and professional networks may earn dozens of likes, shares, tweets, and favorites. Someday, the article might appear on Reddit, Academia.edu or Researchgate.net. It is possible that the increased exposure could lead, over time, tens or even hundreds of readers to download the article. I will be able to see this activity and may even notice if this piece reaches the "Most Downloaded" column on the homepage for *Computers and Composition* [Fig. 1]. The modest number of views, likes, shares, or downloads will not help me earn promotion or tenure, but those metrics and rankings will influence how I will feel about the finished product and how readers will approach my ideas.

The number of views, likes, shares, and downloads attached to this article or any text that is shared through relatively open networks like Facebook, Twitter, or YouTube *could* jump suddenly and exponentially. Scholarly arguments and academic research do (albeit rarely) go viral. Consider Adam Banks's 2015 Conference on College Composition and Communication Chair address, "Funk, Flight, Freedom" (2015), which, as soon as a videotaped version was uploaded to YouTube, was discussed in highly-trafficked blog columns such as Multimodal Mondays (2015), sparked lengthy debates on the WPA listserv, and accumulated more than 4,600 views in less than one month. Or, for a far more striking example, consider Michael Wesch's famous "The Machine is Us/ing Us" (2007), which has 11.9 million views on YouTube. Banks's claim regarding the "centrality of technology to what we do," is compatible with Wesch's critique of how "the machine" of online search engines, algorithms, and Web 2.0 tools "use" the inputs from each search, click, and keystroke to refine outputs and influence what and how users subsequently search and gather information. The scholarly arguments created by Banks and Wesch offered intriguing entry points for their colleagues to think about writing studies and literacies in the twenty-first-century; additionally, the virality of these videos illustrates conflicts between social media networks, popularity metrics, and commonly held beliefs about composing, publishing, and assessing academic work. During a talk given at my campus in 2012, Wesch joked that on the morning in 2007 when he realized his YouTube video had gone viral, he called his department chair to ask about his tenure review. Wesch was clearly joking, and the audience laughed at the idea that a viral video could contribute to a tenure case, but this joke could also be understood as cause for serious concern.

The fact that some academic work "goes viral"—along with the ambiguous value of "likes" in academic settings and the challenge of assessing compositions that can be circulated (without using circulation metrics)—underscores two relevant questions for digital pedagogies: First, how do the popularity metrics (the number of shares, views, likes, ♥'s, tweets, etc.) shape our reading practices and metacognitive evaluations of the digital composition process? Second, how might "going viral," or the sudden, explosive proliferation of academic content (which, for my purposes, includes video-recorded lectures, peer-reviewed articles, and scholarship directed to the public) influence scholarly reward systems or the dissemination of educational content? Bill Cope and Mary Kalantzis (2008) have raised concerns similar the second question: "What would happen to the knowledge and learning of elite institutions, if they stooped to the logic of mass delivery?" (p. 381). Elite institutions already use new *models* of mass delivery that, in general, move away from the brick-and-mortar classroom towards MOOCs and YouTube.edu Channels, and from printed peer-reviewed journals