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Fan Spaces as Third Spaces: Tapping into the Creative Community of Fandom

Jen McConnell found that introducing aspects of fan culture in her classroom fostered a sense of playfulness and camaraderie.

On the first day of class, the Slytherin table (most of the tech and science students in the room) gleefully embraced their chosen identity and set out to convince the rest of us that Slytherin is the place to be. Clearly, their campaign worked: for the fifth week in a row, one student has made a point to tell me that she's a Slytherin, not a Hufflepuff, thank you very much. And another student emailed to share that he had just started reading the Harry Potter books for the first time because of our class discussions. These students are preservice teachers, some of them entering their second careers, most of them in their twenties and beyond, and we're not in an English classroom: this is one of their professional courses, focused on the rules and ethics of teaching. So why in the world are we talking about Hogwarts?

FABULOUS FANDOMS

From the continued surge of wizards and muggles greeting new material from J. K. Rowling with costumes and fanfare to online spaces such as Wattpad and Fanfiction.net, there are countless ways for people to experience fan content that stimulates their creativity and fosters a sense of camaraderie. Fandoms cultivate community built on shared interests and passions. Fan culture is vast, with multiple entry points, and many of our students are already participating with various fandoms. Instead of ignoring these pop cultural spaces, what potential could we

invite into our classrooms by engaging in fandoms with our students? Although fan spaces have traditionally functioned outside of the classroom, fan culture provides a rich third space for growing our classroom communities and inviting students to integrate various aspects of themselves into the process of learning.

If we consider the school to function as the “first space” and the home or outside of school world to be the “second space,” a third space is formed in the liminal overlap between the two, where students are able to use their strengths and skills from each space to participate more fully in learning (Assaf; Dredger et al.; Moje et al.). This article explores how teachers might tap into the generative third spaces of fandoms to create community, to encourage authentic and collaborative academic literacy practices, and to help students discover ways that fan spaces can benefit their work in school. Fan spaces have their own complex literacy practices, and those practices can be brought into the work that is already happening in our ELA classrooms.

POTENTIAL PATHWAYS

There is a growing body of literature exploring the possibilities presented by third spaces, particularly in literacy development. Third spaces are “hybrid cultural spaces” (Assaf 1) that offer students “a way to build bridges from knowledges and Discourses often marginalized in school settings to the learning

of conventional academic knowledges” (Moje et al. 44). Students enter our classrooms with a range of fluencies, but often, a canonical reading list and narrow orientation to curriculum forces students to check those literacies at the door. There is a need for the recognition of and integration of the various literacies and “funds” of knowledge that students enter school with, and third space scholars advocate the need to merge “first” and “second” spaces of community and school to create effective “third spaces” for student learning (Moje et al.). Put another way, consider the world of Harry Potter: muggles and wizards inhabit two separate spaces, and the opportunities for shared discourse are incredibly limited. However, at the start of the final book of the series, the muggle Prime Minister and the wizard Minister of Magic meet in an attempt to create a strategic plan that acknowledges the overlap of their worlds, engaging in the tentative creation of a third space. How different their worlds would be if that third space were allowed to fully develop, particularly for the children with magical abilities who, like Harry and Hermione, were not raised in the wizarding world, and whose home experiences are vastly different from those of their peers.

As Katie Dredger et al. observe, students tend to be more enthusiastic about and invested in their out-of-school literacy practices than what we assign in the classroom (85), which can feel disheartening as an instructor. However, many ELA classrooms have begun to embrace the potential of students’ multiliteracies, incorporating, for example, blogging and podcasting into lessons on composition (e.g., Costello; Kelly and Brower; Kramer and Cole). Approaching multiliteracies and third spaces from a fandom perspective can help educators infuse energy, creativity, and playfulness in our classrooms to better engage and support students.

FAN PHRASES

The ideas presented here have grown out of my work with preservice teachers and high school English students and first began to take root in a paper I presented at the Modern Language Association (MLA)

annual conference titled “The Curriculum of Fandom: What Are Writers Learning on Wattpad?” This current work is also informed by the recent publication *Fandom as Classroom Practice*, edited by Katherine Anderson Howell, which, although targeting a postsecondary audience, offers a host of perspectives on the possibilities of incorporating fan culture into our classrooms, as well as an overview of fan studies as the discipline relates to education.

Before diving into an exploration of fandoms, it will be helpful to establish a shared understanding of key terms (as seen in Figure 1). First, there’s *fan*, which shares the same root as “fanatic,” and, according to Kristina Busse, has been in use since the 1800s, when it implied athletic supporters, but was quickly linked with the readers of genre fiction, especially science fiction: Sherlock Holmes had a Victorian fandom that mourned the detective’s death (Busse 386). As readerships and genres continue to expand, however, *fan* has come to mean any individual who is invested in and engaged with someone else’s narrative. I use the term *fandom* to indicate the collective culture of self-described fans, specifically of a fictional world or character. Within a fandom, readers and writers may interact in *fan spaces*, actual or virtual gathering spaces for members of the fandom. J. K. Rowling’s site *Pottermore.com* is an example of a fan space controlled by a creator; a local comic con—conventions of varying sizes where fans from multiple fandoms have a chance to come together—is another, more fluid fan space. Within fan spaces, a fan may encounter *fanon* (narrative works, often termed *fanfiction*, created by fans that differ from the “canon” of the original work being fanned over), and *fan practices*, which can include, but are not limited to, crafting fanon and engaging in role play. One final term I want to mention is *ship*, often used in fan spaces as both a noun and a verb to describe fan investment in a romantic relationship between two characters (sometimes codified in canon, ships exist more frequently in fanon, e.g., “I ship Catwoman and Batman, but I don’t really ship Harley Quinn and the Joker,” or “this couple is my favorite ship”).

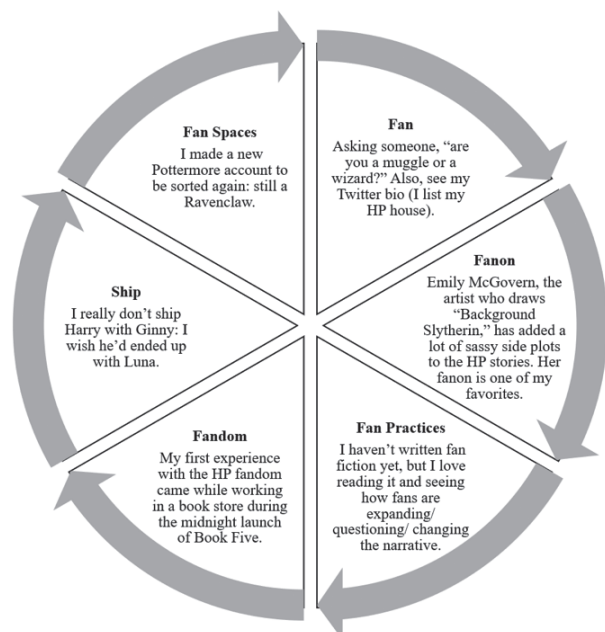


FIGURE 1.
Terms and Examples Using the Harry Potter Fandom

FAN PRACTICES AS PRAXIS ENGAGING WRITERS AND READERS

Ray Bradbury once offered the following advice about writing: "If you are writing without zest, without gusto, without love, without fun, you are only half a writer" (4). A sense of fun can sometimes slip through the cracks in our classrooms, especially as students move through school. It might serve us well to look beyond the traditional writing assignments of the ELA classroom and invite students to explore other spaces where young people are engaged in enthusiastic writing practices. Wattpad and similar sites dedicated to reader-generated content are spaces where the zest and gusto Bradbury extolls are on display.

When Wattpad was founded, it was originally meant to be an "app to read and chat about fiction shared by professional and aspiring writers from around the world" (Thomas). However, in the more than ten years since its creation, Wattpad has evolved into a vibrant Web-based publishing community. The collaborative atmosphere of Wattpad has cultivated a vast creative community where readers and writers do not exist in isolation: rather,

"it's like readers are all writing notes in the margins of the same print book while the author looks over everyone's shoulders . . . such discussions expand the boundaries of a story" (Sobieck 12). Wattpad, as a large-scale fan space that includes many fandoms, is a place where close reading and composition merge into rich, authentic literacy practices, something I would like to integrate more of into my classroom.

Although many of the composition assignments students encounter in the ELA classroom focus on individual work, the power of collaboration throughout the writing process, which is a characteristic of fan spaces, has been shown to help students engage more authentically with a writing activity. For example, when they know someone other than their instructor is going to read their writing, students are more likely to take care in crafting the work (Buckley-Marudas 49). And the process of peer review not only engages students in authentic experiences of audience and purpose, but it also allows students to demonstrate their own learning. In fact, when properly scaffolded, student peer reviews can be as effective and valid as instructor feedback (Schunn et al.). The collaboration modeled on Wattpad and other fan spaces can provide a starting point for students who are learning how to engage with each other's work and offer feedback in a positive and productive way (Howell).

UNCOVERING THE LITERACY OF FAN PRACTICES

I explored Wattpad by searching for the phrase "how to write," which generated more than 90,000 stories. There were titles like "How to Write a Sonnet," "How to Write a Song," "How to Write like a Boss," and lots of variations on "how to write a book" (a good book, a great book, a book in a week). The one that sparked my interest was "How to Write Fanfiction." I quickly realized that I'd chosen a particularly interesting example. The story is collaborative, published by the Wattpad community "Fanfic," and written by a variety of different authors, with each author responsible for one short blog-style chapter to give specific fanfiction crafting advice.

Perhaps my most important takeaway from reading the manual is the understanding that “fandom is all about participation, so knowing the common tongue will help you understand the type of fic your [sic] most likely to enjoy writing . . . learn to talk the talk before walking the walk” (Fanfic). Fanfiction, it would seem, is a discourse community with its own rules and structures, and access to that community is dependent on fluency with a specialized language. To me, the instructions for the Fanfic community sound an awful lot like the academic literacy practices that we expect students to engage with on a daily basis: use the language of different disciplines and situations to demonstrate knowledge, but to also demonstrate that they “belong” in the academic community in question.

As has been noted in writing studies, “the extent to which we align ourselves with a particular community . . . can be gauged by the extent to which we are able and willing to use that community’s language, make its rhetorical moves, act with its privileged texts, and participate in its writing processes and practices” (Adler-Kassner and Wardle 51). Students,

like the writers engaging in the Fanfic community on Wattpad, are regularly asked to demonstrate how well they fit within their chosen (or assigned) community through their literacy practices. In the ELA classroom, that means integrating MLA citation and formatting practices, developing a formal writing voice that does not rely on colloquialisms, and using the right terms at the right times—for

example, being able to write with confidence about the difference between satire and parody and where a work like George Orwell’s *Animal Farm* sits in such a discussion. The rules of our classrooms may not be the same rules as a fan space, but they certainly stem from a similar impulse: to demonstrate the skills and

knowledge necessary to belong to that space through shared literacy practices.

An awareness of fanfiction conventions, then, might offer a way to energize student literacy practices in the classroom. As Busse and Hellekson note, “The act of performing fandom parallels the act of performing academia. Both rely on dialogue, community, and intertextuality” (qtd. in Howell 5). For all students, regardless of their previous experiences with fanfiction, there is something to be learned from exploring fandom, since “the multi-modal, multidisciplinary, audience-centered kinds of writing done by fan writers online enhances fans’ learning of key literacy, critical thinking, and analytic skills, which instructors often strive for” (Howell 8). Opening the classroom to include the lessons of fan spaces validates students’ out-of-school literacy, particularly their digital literacies, since so many fandoms thrive as apps and online spaces, while at the same time reinvigorating the curricular work we do.

FANON TO CANON IMAGINING THE ELA CLASSROOM AS A FAN SPACE

One way to harness the energy of fan culture and invite students to bring their own fandoms into the classroom is to create a fandom in the classroom with a simple sorting ice breaker. I’ve always enjoyed the Harry Potter series, so last fall, I decided to integrate that enthusiasm into my course. Since I was using Harry Potter, I brainstormed positive words that could represent the values of each house. On the first day of class, I invited students to pick a word based on what they would most value in their professional colleagues, but it would be easy to adapt the exercise to reflect characteristics of group members or peers in general. My students chose between intelligence (Ravenclaw), loyalty (Gryffindor), resourcefulness (Slytherin), and inclusivity (Hufflepuff). Initially, I did not mention the fandom connection. I was sure the students would see it, but they didn’t, even when I began passing out stickers in the house colors to the various groups. After students had time to brainstorm the reasons they valued their chosen characteristic, I invited them to share with the

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class. I can't keep a secret very long, so after the first group presented, I jumped in and said, "And now we know who our Gryffindors are!" Once students knew they were working in a fan space, the first-day classroom suddenly felt like we'd been together for months. Everyone relaxed, joking about the houses and whether or not they fit the place where they'd sorted themselves. In addition to the playful sense of community, this ice breaker also gave us the shared language of the fan space to talk about issues in teaching and learning: we regularly reference characters and scenarios from the series when we are talking through real-world concerns, such as showing favoritism in class and planning engaging lessons. By building our classroom around a fandom, we've established our own language to connect to learning, and because Harry Potter is a fandom many of my students already inhabited, the first day of class cued to them that they and their out-of-school literacy experiences are welcomed in our learning community.

Integrating fandoms does not have to require an overhaul of existing lessons or classroom practices. Consider linking the core curricular texts with a fandom, such as pairing the *Odyssey* with the mythic superheroes of the Marvel or DC Universes. When reading Shakespeare, consider asking students to identify with and root for one character in particular. Are they team Romeo or team Paris? Do they ship Mercutio with Benvolio? Keeping in mind that a fan is any individual who is invested in and engaged with someone else's narrative, the possibilities for cultivating fandoms in narrative-rich ELA classrooms are limitless.

EMBRACING FAN PRACTICES TO TEACH LITERACY PRACTICES

A quick search of YouTube reveals a thriving population of YouTubers who focus on the nuances of parody and satire, and many of them work within the confines of specific fandoms. My favorite example comes from the YouTuber who publishes under the name Paint, whose creatively filmed musical parodies question the persistence of "happily ever after" endings in animated Disney movies (Schroeder).



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These parodies are witty and hard-hitting, taking on issues such as illegal immigration, environmental issues, and colonialism, among other contemporary social topics (Cozart). Bringing a fandom parody video into the classroom offers a creative way to guide students to an understanding of the nuanced differences between parody and satire, and it could also serve as a prompt for an analytical writing exercise, where students are invited to critique the parody as an act of social commentary, arguing whether the artist has missed the mark or created something worth thinking about.

Another idea would be to engage in fan practices as classroom literacy practices through an exercise in close reading. The comments on Wattpad, for example, are often as complex as the stories themselves and offer a great model for the kind of individualized and engaged close reading we want to help our students develop. Consider pulling a screen cap of the engaged annotations that happen in a fan space

and presenting it to students as an exemplar of what personal, conversational annotations can look like. It would also be easy to use the example as a discussion prompt to talk about what, exactly, constitutes an annotation, allowing students the space to decide for themselves if the personal, chatty style of fan comments resonates for them as a way to engage with in-school texts.

Fan practices often align with classroom literacy practices in unexpected ways, and the possibilities for deliberately integrating the two are endless, since “fan creations and communities provide a way to navigate and encourage messy classroom dialogue” (Howell 1). The line between creator and reader is blurred through fan practices, and this blurring invites a conversation about authority and textual ownership. Embracing that messy dialogue in ELA classrooms might energize students as they approach their work, particularly if teachers can use fan practices to model to students engaged, authentic literacy practices. Are the fans readers or authors? And who has the right to decide what becomes canon?

EXPLORING THE THIRD SPACES OF FANDOMS

There are many fandoms and many fan spaces to explore, but it is worth noting that the presence of erotic stories and adult content on many fanon-filled sites, including Wattpad, makes them unlikely to pass various school board policies for formal inclusion in the classroom. However, don't discount the potential of these sites. One possible idea is to design an inquiry assignment where students explore online publishing spaces or collaborative writing tools, such as wikis, blogs, or fandom sites like Wattpad or fanfiction.net. Another exploration might stem from whatever fandom anchors your classroom culture: since I build my classrooms around Harry Potter, a natural extension would be to invite students to sign up for *Pottermore* accounts. This site offers a host of texts meant to extend the wizarding world, some of which read like magical Wikipedia entries. Students might analyze one of the “informational” articles on the site and compare it to another short work meant to inform, like an encyclopedia entry. Expanding

into the virtual “third space” of the variety of fandoms that are available is an exciting way to extend learning beyond the confines of the classroom, and the potential to build bridges between in-class and out-of-class learning is vast.

Sometimes, I catch myself wondering if the students in my class are tired of our Harry Potter references. But when we got into a conversation about student activism and social justice, I used the example of the DA, the illicit training group that Harry and his friends form as a response to the regime of Dolores Umbridge during the fifth book, and their faces lit up. Later, when they were leaving class, a pair of students approached me to discuss the metaphor, drawing connections between the DA and their own experiences as learners and future teachers, and as the course continues, multiple students have mentioned that metaphor as having been foundational to their thinking during the course. My commitment to bridging fanon and canon to create a third space of engaged learning has been strengthened by the depth of student responses, and I will continue to adapt these fandom-inspired activities for other courses and contexts. As Ashley Poston, the author of the *Geekerella* novels, reminds us, “there is a magic in fandom that there rarely is anywhere else . . . it is the kind of magic that brings our far corners of the world together” (319). Tapping into that magic in our ELA classrooms can help our students forge connections with each other and the course content in unique and exciting ways.

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READWRITETHINKCONNECTION Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

When you're a fan of a particular book or series of books, it can be hard to reach that last page and know it will all soon be over. With fanfiction, it doesn't have to be! Fanfiction is fiction written by admirers of a certain work or genre, anything from fantasy to comedy to romance. While keeping close to the spirit of the original, fanfiction allows children to explore their favorite stories by borrowing characters, plot elements, and settings and using them in their own creative writing process. <http://bit.ly/1k59B7c>