

Access and affiliation: The literacy and composition practices of English-language learners in an online fanfiction community

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Networked computer environments offer great possibilities for developing adolescent English-language learners' interactive writing abilities.

After reading J.R.R. Tolkien's novels as a child, I had a difficult time leaving Middle Earth behind. There were so many plotlines and characters left unexplored that I began to write new stories using the characters and settings from Tolkien's universe. At the time I was unaware that there were many children and adults across the United States who were enthusiastically producing similar works of fanfiction and publishing them in personal fan magazines (zines) or distributing them privately among the fan community. (See Jenkins, 1992, for an extensive history of fanfiction.) Fanfictions are original works of fiction based on forms of popular media such as television, movies, books, music, and video games. It was not until graduate school, when my research began to center on digitally mediated literacies and online cultures, that I realized there were countless other people across the globe who had been writing paper fanfiction for years and were now "meeting" online to share, review, and build on one another's fictions.

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As a researcher of second-language acquisition (SLA) and literacy who has taught English as a second language (ESL) for years, I was even more intrigued to find that there are a great many

English-language learners (ELLs) who are also writing, posting, and reviewing fictions in English in these online fanfiction communities. I wanted to find out what was so compelling about this space that adolescent ELLs would spend hours writing and reviewing fictions in English, when I could barely get many of my students to write a one-page essay in English class. During my observations across various fanfiction-related sites, the notions of "access" to and "affiliation" with SLA and writing came increasingly to mind.

Freeman and Freeman (1994) discussed the interplay of a range of in- and out-of-school factors that contribute to a language learner's access to SLA, such as level of acceptance by the community, background knowledge and experiences, and interactions with peers and teachers, as well as teaching and learning approaches within the community. These all seemed to be salient elements of the fan community that were influencing ELLs' participation within this space. In addition, the notion of affiliation emerged in several different ways, including the traditional conception of "language affiliation" or the level of

identification or allegiance a learner has with the target language (Rampton, 1990); the fans' allegiance to, or affiliation with, a particular fandom and fans' "affiliatory" practices with other fans (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000); and fans' commitment to, or affiliation with, writing online. As I spent more time observing the sophisticated literacy and meaning-making practices taking place in one particular archival fanfiction community at www.fanfiction.net, I drew on these notions of access and affiliation and formulated the following questions to guide a more focused inquiry into this space:

- In what ways does this site provide ELLs with access to literacy learning and literacy-related practices in areas where many school-based programs have not succeeded?
- How might the virtual environment and digital mode of communication scaffold or promote affiliation with composing and interacting in English?

In this article I draw on constructs from literacy studies and second-language acquisition as conceptual bases for developing some preliminary answers to these questions. I begin by providing an introduction to fanfiction.net, the archival fanfiction community that is the primary site of my ongoing ethnographic research. This is followed by a discussion of methodology and data collection. Next, I explore the interface and structure of the site and discuss how these elements facilitate access to literacy learning and promote affiliation for fans. The subsequent sections present excerpts of fanfiction writing and peer reviews in order to illustrate how the online fanfiction genre, coupled with the networked and interactive aspects of the community, all contribute to ELLs' participation within the site. In conclusion, I discuss how our understandings of such online spaces might be useful in the development of new pedagogical practices and approaches in the area of literacy studies.

Situating my inquiry

In order to understand the richness, complexity, and significance of adolescents' individual acts of literacy, it is important to firmly situate these acts within their context(s) of use. The site fanfiction.net is housed in and hyperlinked to a multifandom archive that contains hundreds of thousands of works of original fanfiction. For example, there were over 20,000 Final Fantasy video game-related fictions and approximately 127,000 texts based on Harry Potter books (as of April 24, 2003). The Card Captor Sakura section of the archive had approximately 14,000 fictions (as of April 24, 2003), and fans post new fictions to these categories every day. Clearly there is a considerable amount of writing going on at this site; however, what is particularly relevant for literacy researchers and noteworthy for educators is the kinds of writing going on, the metatalk about writing, the meaning-making and identity work related to writing, and the sort of people who are doing the writing.

In an article on print fanfiction, Chandler-Olcott and Mahar (2003) drew on the work of several New Literacy Studies (NLS) researchers to examine print fanfiction as a valid literacy practice. This article seeks to extend their work into the virtual realm by using the NLS framework as a theoretical lens to explore the ways the digital medium not only scaffolds but also is an integral part of the literacy and meaning-making practices (e.g., composing and interacting in multiple genres and social registers and offering sophisticated reviews and meta-analyses of fictions) that adolescent ELLs use as they post fanfictions on fanfiction.net. In this article I draw on, and seek to contribute to, the burgeoning body of socio-cultural research on SLA of online contexts (Kramsch, A'Ness, & Lam, 2000; Lam, 2000; Warschauer, 2000). I explore how the digital medium and the online context of this community offer ELLs multiple means of establishing legitimacy as fans and opportunities for rhetorically constructing themselves as successful authors.

SLA and literacy researchers are beginning to look in earnest at the Internet and the opportunities it provides for authentic linguistic and social interactions within contexts that are meaningful for participants. Research of native and nonnative speaker practices suggests that online communication environments with high levels of interactivity—such as e-mail listserv forums (Jones, 1999; Lam, 2000), Internet Relay Chat systems (Reid, 1991), MUDs (Multi-User Domains) and MOOs (Multi-Object Oriented Domains; Turkle, 1995), Web-based discussion areas and fan forums (Baym, 1998; Mitra, 1997), and virtual communities (Rheingold, 1993)—provide extensive opportunities for native and nonnative English speakers to use literacy skills to forge relationships with individuals who share their interests. In this article I take a sociocultural approach to language and literacy. I do not view reading and writing as discrete skill sets that can be learned independently of social interaction but as dialogic meaning-making processes that are acquired and embedded in specific social contexts (Bakhtin, 1986; Gee, 1996). Thus, analyses focus on the various ways in which this site enables ELLs to forge connections with other fans and to establish a social base within this discourse community. This, in turn, provides them with 24-hour access to native English speakers and facilitates authentic, meaningful use of language and literacy (Warschauer, 2000).

The fictions and reviews from this site that I focus on are based primarily on the Japanese animation, or anime, series *Card Captor Sakura*. The original plot centers around a young Japanese girl named Sakura Kinomoto who discovers a deck of magical cards hidden in a book in her father's library. These magical cards represent different elemental forces such as wind, water, and lightning. When the book is opened, the cards are all released in their elemental forms to wreak havoc in Sakura's hometown. Her job is to learn to use her own magical powers in order to recapture and become master of the Clow Cards. The two-part movie and 70-episode television show aired in Japan, the United States, and then internationally

for a brief period. The show and the movies are no longer running, but the manga, or Japanese comics, are still available in many countries. The fanfictions in this category are written primarily by elementary- to college-age females living in the United States who speak English as their first language; however, I chose this site because there are many adolescent ELLs living in the United States who currently post their fictions on it and interact primarily in English.

Methods of data generation and analysis

To gather and explore data for this project, I employed traditional ethnographic and discourse analytic methods in examining the everyday interactions and literacy-related activities of participants within this community. Through roughly a year of focused participant observation, I was able to gain a nuanced understanding of how language and discourse shape, and are shaped by, the social practices and context of the community (Hine, 2000; Spradley, 1980). In my observations, I examined various ELLs' publicly posted interactions with other members of the site and how they used these interactions to construct themselves as legitimate members of the community and to build a social base within the fan community. In addition, I concentrated analysis on the various composition-related resources that were encountered and taken up by ELLs in their own writing. Through such participant observation, I attempted to identify the social, textual, and technological elements of the networked fanfiction community that may have scaffolded or promoted ELLs' writing and reading activities.

It seems important to mention, at this point, the matter of ethics in online ethnographic research. This recently has become a topic of much debate, especially in light of the increasing amounts of research now taking place in indigenous online communities (Hine, 2000). The primary question here is this: "Can we justifiably regard online interactions on bulletin boards,

mailing lists and in chat rooms as ‘public status’ or do they constitute, as others may argue, a form of private conversation which is embedded within a public space?” (Cavanagh, 1999). In response to this question, I point out that the fictions and reviews used in this article constitute a form of public interaction, open to any reader with Internet access. Moreover, an inherent part of this particular community is the intentionally public nature of publishing and reviewing texts. As Cavanagh pointed out in her discussion of the ethics of online ethnography, “Sociology has long accepted that public behaviours are a legitimate object for research insofar as such research focuses on the forms of interaction, rather than the acts of any individual.” Moreover, the site itself hosts columns that include analysis and metadiscussion of excerpts from various publicly posted fictions and reviews. The point is that fans realize their public posts may be taken up and analyzed in a variety of ways. In addition, as an author of online fanfiction, I firmly believe that in posting my fictions in a public archive, I am implicitly giving permission for these texts to be analyzed, critiqued, or lauded by readers and reviewers. That being said, as a researcher and educator, I still feel obligated to obtain traditional forms of consent from any particular authors whom I might focus on in my research and am careful to change identifiable usernames or “Googleable” titles or text. I also consider the use of any data that involves “chat” or related correspondence between fans, even in public chat rooms, and any sort of public or private interviews as data bound by the same constraints, ethical codes, and official human subjects limitations as traditional, offline ethnographic research.

Fanfiction.net

In his seminal work examining fanfiction, Jenkins (1992) pointed out that “fan culture is a complex, multidimensional phenomenon, inviting many different forms of participation and levels of engagement” (p. 5). Part of the appeal of this space for ELLs, among others, is that fans who do not feel confident enough in their English or writing

abilities to compose and post fictions are still able to meaningfully participate within the fan community. An exploration of the highly networked structure or interface of fanfiction.net is helpful in understanding how this digital space offers ELLs multiple means of establishing their legitimacy as fans and affiliating themselves with the fanfiction community, which also provides them with access to the many literacy-related resources of the fan writing community.

To begin with, each registered member of the site has a personal page that lists biographical and optional contact information. In addition to listing information such as age and nationality, many members use the bio space to display preferences and dislikes that run the gamut from favorite music bands and video games to least favorite movies and subjects in school. Through these public symbols of affiliation, adolescents are able to forge connections with other members of the site who share their interest in these elements of popular culture. The bio space is also used to list favorite anime series and characters, as well as to state how long a member has been interested in a particular fandom. This allows members to display knowledge of the genre and to establish legitimacy as longtime animé fans.

The personal page also has designated spaces for links to homepages or personal websites, a function that allows members to establish legitimacy as fans in several ways. For instance, many ELLs provide links to their homepages or websites where they have posted fan art or music videos related to the anime series. More technologically savvy members may provide links to interactive sites or messageboards they have created and host. This function is significant for ELLs in that it enables them to display talents and convey messages in multiple modes of representation that are not wholly dependent on English-language or writing proficiency. As such, it provides opportunities for them to draw on prior knowledge and experience as a means of gaining social and intellectual cachet within the community.

Also included in the personal page is a hyperlinked list of summaries of all the stories an

author might have posted. Members can read the complete fiction by clicking on the hyperlink. Beside each story is a link to all posted reviews of the fiction. A reader may post an anonymous review; however, most reviews are “signed” in that they automatically provide a link back to the reviewer’s personal page and, hence, to any stories he or she might have authored. This hyperlinked format facilitates one of the unofficial codes of conduct followed on the site, that of reviewing the fictions of authors who review your fictions. By submitting signed reviews, members such as ELLs who may not yet feel comfortable enough to author their own fictions are still able to establish a social base within the community. The signed review function also gives ELLs an opportunity to display sophisticated genre knowledge of a particular fandom, and they are able to offer meaningful critiques that are not necessarily based on grammatical elements of composition. Thus, they are able to construct themselves as legitimate readers and reviewers of anime-based fanfiction and ensure their acceptance within the community (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Another way that members can broaden their social base, receive more exposure as authors, and forge connections with other members is by creating hyperlinked lists of “favorite authors” and “favorite stories” on their personal page. The technology of the site promotes these connections by providing members with user-friendly checkboxes that automatically add authors or fictions to their favorites list with hyperlinks back to their personal pages or fictions. Thus, multiple aspects of the highly networked structure of this site enable ELLs who have not authored any stories to still construct themselves as legitimate fans as they participate in the review process, interact with other members, and create a social base to support them when they do begin to author and post fictions.

Design

Members of the New London Group (NLG), who pioneered new ways of looking at literacy that

collectively became known as the New Literacy Studies, set forth the concept of Design to emphasize aspects of literacy that extend beyond the decoding and encoding of print. Design “emphasizes the relationships between received modes of meaning (Available Designs), the transformation of these modes of meaning in their hybrid and intertextual use (Designing), and their subsequent to-be-received status (The Redesigned)” (1996, p. 81). As Chandler-Olcott and Mahar (2003) pointed out, this notion of Design is helpful for looking at the ways in which fan authors draw on and then rework available cultural resources through their texts. Design can be differentiated from writing in several ways. To begin with, participation through Design is not confined to words. Design emphasizes multimodality—in other words, the synergy of different representational forms that can be easily achieved and is more salient in online than print-based texts. Digital composition allows designers to incorporate linguistic forms, as well as visual, audio, gestural, and spatial forms and patterns, that may combine any or all of these modes of meaning making into their texts. This is significant because it enables ELLs who are developing their writing skills in English to augment words with other modes of expression such as images and sound. These ELLs can then convey more sophisticated meaning through their texts. Moreover, this multimodal means of communicating gives ELLs increased access to the community in the sense that they can also draw on images and emoticons to convey meaning in their online communications with other fans.

Linguistic and cultural hybridity

Hybridity is another key concept used in the NLS that is useful for understanding the multimodal negotiation of meaning taking place as authors design texts in the fanfiction community (Chandler-Olcott & Mahar, 2003). Hybridity is an aspect of Design that involves rearticulating

conventionally accepted “modes of meaning” such as discourses and genres in order to create new meanings (NLG, 1996). Cultural and linguistic hybridity is particularly salient in anime-based fanfictions because anime is a Japanese cultural production, and many of the series are set in Japan and China and incorporate many elements of Japanese and Chinese language and culture. As a result, native English speakers are not automatically granted privileged status within the community, and ELLs with Japanese and Chinese backgrounds are often granted insider status within the realm of anime.

To make their fictions seem more authentic, many fan authors choose to create linguistically hybrid texts and will request help with adding Japanese or Chinese vocabulary to their stories. Newbies (newcomers to the community) often post messages asking for Japanese translations of various words so that they can add them to their fictions. It is not unusual for a native Japanese speaker to correct an author who is misusing a Japanese word. However, the English translations of Card Captor Sakura manga do not integrate Japanese words spelled out in this manner, so this appears to be a practice used mainly by the fanfiction authors. Japanese words, such as *kawaii* (cool or cute) and *arigatou* (thank you), are integrated with fictions as a badge of membership in the anime community.

Authors also ask for clarification of culturally specific symbols, folklore, and themes that appear in the anime or manga. Many writers request information about typical home and school practices in Japan and China in order to make their fictions more realistic. In addition, it is not uncommon to see reviews of a fiction in which the writer is criticized for an inaccurate portrayal of Japanese life. This gives some ELLs the opportunity to act as “experts” and to gain some status and confidence within the community by acting as “cultural consultants” of sorts. When ELLs post their own fictions, the texts are generally reviewed with an emphasis on communicative function over form, meaning that an ELL’s fiction may be

valued for its creativity, accurate depiction of Japanese culture, or introduction of interesting information about animé or Japanese life, even when it contains grammatical and spelling errors. These hybrid elements of this online fanfiction genre scaffold ELLs’ access to the development of literacy skills by enabling them to act as “experts.” Such access allows them to construct identities as successful writers within the anime-based genre and thus increase their acceptance as English-language users within the community.

Hybrid identities

Contemporary work in SLA has turned toward electronic environments as rich sites for exploring how, through a wide range of technologically mediated literate activities (e.g., e-mailing, chatting, gaming, and publishing on the World Wide Web), ELLs have the freedom to use and practice English with native speakers (Warschauer, 2000), develop an “authorial voice” (Kramersch et al., 2000), and take on an identity as an English-language user (Lam, 2000) outside the constraints of the classroom. The notion of hybridity is useful for understanding how ELLs in this space are able to use acts of literacy to publicly perform aspects of their identities and, in so doing, affiliate themselves with the fan community.

Fan authors often construct hybridized identities that are enacted through their texts. It is not uncommon for authors to insert themselves into their fictions as characters that possess a mixture of idealized and authentic personality traits. For example, within the fanfiction community, the term *Mary Sue* describes a particular type of hybridized character. According to the dictionary of fanfiction terms at Writer’s University (an online site designed specifically for aiding fanfiction authors in their composition), a *Mary Sue* is “A character that may be loosely based on the author. The character often is perfect and has a tendency to save the day. The story may focus [on] canon characters and their relationship to the character.” Thus, *Mary Sues* are

recognized as one way that many female adolescents fuse their own identities with those of the characters and write themselves into a position of power in the fiction.

There are also many fictions in which the author essentially hybridizes his or her identity with that of a preexisting media character to express interests, issues, or tensions from his or her own life. For example, many of the texts on fanfiction.net depict the characters from the *Card Captor* series dealing with issues that are never raised in the anime or manga, such as teen pregnancy, school violence, and suicide. Through these hybrid characters, fanfiction authors are able to use literacy skills to articulate and to publicly enact concerns from their daily lives. It is also significant to note that when authors publicly perform distress through their fictions, such as intimating suicide, they often receive an outpouring of community support (through reviews, e-mail, and instant messenger services). These hybrid texts represent communicative events, situated in specific contexts, that are intended for an audience of peer readers who have similar interests and may share many of the same concerns.

In addition, the online medium encourages fan authors to design fictions that are intended to enact multiple aspects of their identities for a broad and diverse audience, as the Web audience is not bounded in the same ways that an offline space such as a classroom is. Moreover, the shared affiliation with a particular fandom provides fans with an immediate connection as a basis for communication. In composing online fanfictions, ELLs are able to draw on popular cultural, social, and personal resources to construct an identity as an English writer and reader that may depart significantly from the one that they are able to display in the ESL classroom.

Intertextuality

The NLG (1996) claimed that intertextuality “draws attention to the potentially complex ways in which meanings (such as linguistic meanings)

are constituted through relationships to other texts (real or imaginary), text types (discourses or genres), narratives, and other modes of meaning” (p. 82). Intertextuality plays a crucial role in the Design of meaning within the fanfiction community. Chandler-Olcott and Mahar (2003) claimed that “as a form, fanfictions make intertextuality visible because they rely on readers’ ability to see relationships between the fan-writer’s stories and the original media sources” (p. 562). The connection between the writer’s stories and the original media sources is clearly an example of intertextuality; however, it is only scratching the surface of the intertextual connections that are an integral element of the creative and discursive practices of Design in the community.

To begin with, the genre of online fanfiction allows for and even encourages intertextual connections that extend far beyond the original media sources. For instance, it is perfectly acceptable to create a “songfiction” in which the author uses a popular song as a framework and then incorporates the characters from the anime series into the song. It is also common for authors to borrow the plot from a movie or book that is unrelated to the anime series, as long as this is acknowledged somewhere in the text summary or introduction. These intertextually connected and sometimes hybrid forms enable ELLs to Design and post fictions that are based on a variety of existing frameworks. This makes the composition process easier because there is already a plot and a framework of action to follow. It also relieves the pressure of having to create a wholly new setting or cast of characters. Furthermore, if grammar and spelling errors make the piece difficult to understand, readers will still be able to follow along if they are familiar with the original text on which the fiction is based. These elements of the genre scaffold ELLs toward success as authors.

As an example, the following excerpt is the introduction to a fanfiction that is loosely based on the plot of the movie *You’ve Got Mail* (Ephron, 1998). The excerpt depicts the characters Sakura and Syaoran from *Card Captor*

Sakura meeting and falling in love in a chat room, unaware that they are roommates in real life.

Love Letters

A/N: Konnichiwa minna-san! This is my new story ^_^, Please excuse my grammar and spelling mistakes. Because English is my second language. Also, I'm still trying to improve my writing skills...so this story might be really sucks....—; ;

Summary: Sakura and Syaoran met in a chat room. They have been e-mailing each other for almost 1.5 years, then fall in love. But in real life, Sakura and Syaoran are roommates that hated each other's gut! What happens when they find out each other's secret? S+S E+T

Chapter 1

An auburn haired girl was sitting on the soft sand, with her lab-top opening on her lap. The fresh wind blew against her silky hair gently, as she sighed dreamily. The girl yawned; her emerald green eyes were fixed on her computer screen. She read though the e-mail and smiled brightly. It was a letter from a very special friend of hers; his nickname is "Little Wolf." She opened a new window to type out her reply for this e-mail. (Tanaka Nanako, 2002)

Fanfiction abbreviations: A/N = author's note; S+S = Sakura & Syaoran, a preferred couple pairing; E+T = Eriol & Tomoyo, a preferred couple pairing.

This fiction was written by a 14-year-old native Chinese speaker who includes an author's note after the title in which she self-identifies as an ELL who is trying to improve her composition skills in English. These notes work to ELLs' advantage in many instances because they provide writers with direct access to the reader and enable authors to specifically state those elements of the story (e.g., form or content) on which they would like readers and reviewers to focus.

It is also clear from the reviews that readers do take the author's notes into consideration. Reviewers will explicitly respond to an author's request that readers "Please excuse my grammar and spelling errors, because English is my second language" and will offer support and encouragement to continue writing. They often comment that the writing as an ELL is better than the writing of many native English speakers, or they ac-

knowledge the grammar and spelling errors in the piece but emphasize that they are minor and do not interfere with the effectiveness and overall message of the story. The author's notes also allow ELLs to insert comments into the text when they are unclear about elements of grammar or spelling, and often reviewers will respond to the specific queries in a post. Thus, these author's notes provide ELLs with direct access to many native speakers' knowledge of spelling and grammar. This sort of specified feedback helps to scaffold ELLs' success with using their English literacy skills to compose in this space.

Proofreading and peer review

Chandler-Olcott and Mahar (2003) positioned fanfiction as an entry point for discussion in language arts classrooms to "help students become more metacognitive about their compositions" (p. 564). In this section I discuss how metatalk about multiple elements of composition is an inherent part of online fanfiction in the [fanfiction.net](http://www.fanfiction.net) community. The examples presented also demonstrate how a strong emphasis on peer review, constructive criticism, and collaboration within the community scaffolds ELLs toward more sophisticated literacy practices and provides them with safe and unthreatening access to the many resources of this writing community. *Beta-reader* is the fanfiction term for a proofreader. Beta-readers are an integral part of the online fanfiction community. There are online fanfiction universities where authors can officially seek out the advice of beta-readers. On [fanfiction.net](http://www.fanfiction.net) authors simply post a request for a beta-reader in either a chat room or on the review page, and generally several people will volunteer. Many ELLs write in tandem with one or more beta-readers who read drafts of their stories and comment on elements such as plot, characterization, grammar, spelling, and adherence to genre.

Reviewers also act as unofficial beta-readers for fictions that are posted on the site, and many offer specific, constructive comments on the

forementioned elements of composition. For example, in one lengthy post, a reviewer of the “Love Letters” fanfiction recasts several paragraphs of the story to model effective use of conjunctions, subordinate clauses, and sentence transition. However, it is significant to note that, in rewording the passages, the reviewer does not single out and criticize individual grammatical or spelling errors but instead offers a more holistic critique aimed at helping the author to better convey her meaning. This focus on function rather than form is congruent with theories of effective language teaching that emphasize the importance of the communicative function of language over error correction and forms and conventions (Larsen-Freeman, 1986; Terrell, 1991). Reviewers also may offer specific comments on grammar and elements of composition that impede comprehension; however, what is significant to note is that they almost invariably follow such comments with positive feedback on the plot or a request for more “chappies” (chapters), or ask the author to “update soon.” Such positive feedback and requests for more writing can contribute to the construction of an ELL’s identity as an accomplished writer or designer of fanfiction. In addition, the repeated requests for chapters are a way for readers to express their affiliation with the author’s work. This creates a strong sense of an audience that is eagerly waiting for the story to continue and provides impetus for the author to carry on writing.

There is a marked emphasis on giving constructive feedback and encouragement within this space. Flaming, which means offering hostile and deliberately insulting feedback, is strongly discouraged within the [fanfiction.net](http://www.fanfiction.net) community. This antinflaming attitude is illustrated by the following post in which a reviewer offers support and encouragement to an ELL author after she is “flamed” and threatens to give up posting fanfiction on the site.

AWESOME! I CAN’T BELIEVE IT! YOU GOTTA CONTINUE! PLEASE DON’T GIVE UP! I swear whoever is making all those extremely rude comments

will definitely get a piece of my mind. People who often put other’s work down are only jealous of their creativity and vivid imagination. Although some comments may be useful to the writer they can get quite offensive and instead of encouraging them they discourage them. I think you’re doing an awesome job and are very talented (believe I know what I’m talking about: I call one when I see one!) I added you to my favorites and am telling my friends to read your story! I hope to read more soon and don’t let people’s nasty comments bring you down! Be sure of yourself! All the best to the BEST writer! Ciao! (Chi, 2003)

The marked emphasis on constructive criticism and lack of tolerance for flaming helps to create a safe, accessible space for ELLs and others to write. These elements of the site also help ELL authors to establish a legitimate social position within the community as accomplished writers and promote their continued affiliation with writing in English.

Discussion and implications for education

Clearly, these analyses introduce some of the complex, interconnected aspects of online fanfiction sites that contribute to ELLs’ access to and affiliation with writing and interacting in English. However, a question remains. How can our understandings of these elements of fanfiction sites be leveraged in the development of new pedagogical approaches in the teaching of language and literacy? To begin with, this site is a prime example of technology supporting the sort of meaningful uses of language and literacy that are crucial not only for ELLs but for *all* students in their academic endeavors. While the idea of adding authentic composition activities to the curriculum is not new, the possibilities that networked computer environments offer for developing authentic, interactive writing activities in the classroom are novel in many ways. My own participation posting and reviewing fictions, coupled with my observations in online fanfiction sites, has helped me to understand how the immediacy of reader response via computer

networks does a great deal to develop a sense of audience and to help the writer think about honoring his or her rhetorical purpose.

Moreover, the strong sense of audience and community afforded by the technology of [fanfiction.net](#) influences the sort of peer reviewing, teaching, and learning practices that take place. The peer-review practices show a strong tendency toward maintaining community relationships by tempering critique of form with genuine enthusiasm for content or rhetorical effect, strongly discouraging hostile feedback, and attending to the expressed needs of the author through author's notes or synchronous and asynchronous communication between writers and reviewers. Thus, the potential for immediate discussion and review offered by such a networked space helps to emphasize the highly social nature of writing and highlights the importance of feedback from peers, colleagues, and expert others in the composition process.

The digital mode of communication also allows not only ELLs but all authors to draw on multiple modes of representation and thus a range of semiotic possibilities for making meaning and achieving their rhetorical intent. This foregrounds the close connection between authentic communication and rhetorical appropriateness in computer-mediated literacy activities (Warschauer, 2000). Too often, students (especially those struggling with language and composition-related tasks) are introduced to the computer only as a means of practicing common elements of print-based writing, such as editing, spell-checking, and re-ordering their work (Daiute, 2000; Warschauer, 2000). Whereas, in fanfiction sites students actively participate in sophisticated composition activities—they draw on and synthesize input from a broad audience of peer reviewers; engage in dialogic interaction with readers and other fan authors; and draw on the metaresources available in the community as they revise, edit, and redesign their texts.

Such observations underscore the importance of developing computer-mediated literacy

activities in which students have the freedom to draw on the multiple resources available via online, networked, and digital media in order to publish and convey meaning in ways that are rhetorically appropriate for the medium. Such activities will help provide students with access to the sort of academic writing skills they will need, such as genre-specific composition and addressing specific audiences, as well as access to the sort of digital literacy skills that are becoming an integral part of successful participation in many social, academic, and professional spaces (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003).

The study of indigenous online writing communities such as [fanfiction.net](#) can yield useful insights about how technology and networked computer environments might be used to foster the development of classroom discourse communities where learner activities scaffold the active production and negotiation of meaning through language. Participation in such discourse communities can help ELLs move beyond the mechanical aspects of decoding and encoding in the target language. It can give them access to the sort of discourse competence that will help them achieve what Chun and Plass (2000) called the “ultimate goal” of becoming literate in another language. This goal, according to the authors, is “to be able to successfully express one's own ideas and to comprehend the thoughts of others” (p. 153). Such studies can also yield nuanced understandings of how the genre of online fanfiction offers a range of multimodal, intertextual, and hybrid writing activities in which ELLs are able to draw on personal, academic, and community resources to express their ideas and to communicate with others in English.

By maintaining an emphasis on the social nature of literacy and learning, educators may be able to develop safe, accessible environments for English-language learners and struggling writers to take risks and experiment with new genres of composition and text-based forms of interaction. By highlighting the social and interactive nature of literacy in this space, this study also addresses a

larger question in education research—that of how to make literacy instruction relevant for students and their everyday lives. Bringing identity and social issues to the forefront of the discussion shifts the focus away from a model where reading and writing are viewed either as subject areas or as vehicles for learning content. In the new perspective, language, literacy, and text are seen as integral components of how adolescents construct and maintain their sense of place, identity, and value in the social and academic worlds.

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