Fan Fiction to Support Struggling Writers

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Abstract

Traditional literacies centering on effective reading and writing remain a focus in Texas schools. However, students come to our classrooms with a variety of experiences in new literacies, particularly those based on students' interests in popular media. In an effort to bridge students' digital media experiences with in-school literacies, teachers can provide support through student-created fan fiction. By allowing students to use their existing knowledge of popular characters and settings to generate new narratives, struggling readers can transfer their understandings of literacy concepts and skills to traditional, in-school literacies.

Keywords: *fan fiction, new literacies, struggling writers*

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Traditional literacies have historically focused on the ability to read and write effectively. Typically, these literacies focused on written communication, either by receiving or generating new information and ideas via traditional print modes. It can be argued that adolescents participate in literate behaviors, often through digital means. The PEW Internet and American Life Project found that 95% of adolescents had Internet access, 74% of whom use cell phones as a means (Madden, Lenhart, Duggan, Cortesi, & Gasser, 2013). Additionally, 57% of adolescents reported using the Internet for sharing and creating content (Lenhart, Arafeh, & Smith, 2008). While 85% of adolescents reported to engage in some form of technology for communication purposes, 60% of these adolescents did not consider these authentic forms of writing (Lenhart et al., 2008). Many of these adolescents engage in literacy in the following ways:

1. Effective communication using media like Snapchat, Instagram, and Facebook;

2. New information acquisition by means of online internet searches, online news sources, and fan pages; and

3. Generating new information and ideas, through fan fiction sites, Youtube video demonstrations, live streaming, online blogs, and wikis.

How can we use these new literacies as a bridge to guide students toward improving students' in-school literacy expectations? Specifically, how can the use of fan fiction help tap into students' interests, while supporting students' development of in-school literacies? What happens when struggling writers use a multiliteracy approach to writing instruction by creating fan fiction?

New Literacies

The increase in digital communication has resulted in the development of literacy skills that greatly differ from those of many classroom teachers may have experienced during their adolescence. New literacies refer to news ways in which people read, communicate, and express ideas in the digital world (New London Group, 1996). Mass media has created a world in which information is transmitted in more ways than through traditional written text alone; children today are bombarded by information in various modes through entertainment, advertising, and social media. This information comes at children and adults using visual, audio, spatial, and gestural modes. The new literacies, while not limited to specific types of technology, are often associated with digital texts, media, and multimodal digital literacies (Buckingham, 2000; Knobel & Lankshear, 2014).

Although new literacies help to describe communication and meaning-making practices that are more and more commonly mediated by new technologies, technology does not necessarily encompass all of what we consider new literacies (Knobel & Lankshear, 2014). New literacies not only focus on the use of media and other forms of multimodal texts, but in ways that critically analyze texts (Kellner, 2001; Pilgrim & Martinez, 2013). Therefore, students are in need not only of the skills and knowledge behind the technical use of computers and other forms of technology, but also an understanding of the culture that goes hand in hand with these technologies (Cervetti, Damico, & Pearson, 2006; Kellner, 2001). Students should be prepared to participate in a future that will require them to become literate in many different types of texts and modalities (Gee, 2004; Jenkins, 2008).

Many adolescents have active online identities, and communicate and express themselves using multimodal digital literacies regularly (Gee, 2004; Jenkins, 2008). Schools need to acknowledge the social nature of reading and writing, and the various forms of multiliteracies that exist. Just as teachers and schools do not recognize or value these forms of literacy, adolescents often do not see the potential link between their identities as members of online communities and literacy within schools. As literacy instruction changes, the classroom can become more interdisciplinary and democratic, where students become the apprentices to teachers, gaining more control over their own learning (Kist, 2005).

Websites for entertainment and communication have become major rallying points for teens and young adults interested in video games, music, and other forms of popular media (Lam, 2006). Many students who are disengaged in academic reading and writing are already participants in communication using online and other digital tools. Rather than view these digital multimodal literacies as a diversion from traditional literacy instruction (Black, 2009), teachers should take advantage of their students' prior knowledge to help build both social and academic vocabulary.

Students already identify with reading and writing within digital spaces. These students have formed identities as readers and writers through their interactions on the Internet and through the use of other technology tools. These students need to see themselves as members of a community of writers in a much broader sense, beyond their identity within their online communities (Gee, 2000), one that will help develop writing skills that can be bridged to help with the ways in which public education measures student literacy. The purpose of this study is to find ways in which those existing identities and the discourses associated with them can be bridged to academic reading and writing. One way in which this can happen is for teachers and schools to value students' existing skills in reading, writing, and creating.

Supporting Struggling Readers & Writers

Language Support

Integration of technology tools within classroom instruction has the potential to improve student language acquisition and development. In fact, many teens are already

actively creating new digital online content (Jenkins, 2008). The multiliteracy activities that students are engaged in at home can be used to build vocabulary and language skills important for academic success.

One way that students use multiliteracies is through online chat or message boards. These online tools allow students to communicate their ideas and thoughts with an online community on common interests. Many of these online groups create their own unique language, which aids in creating a community "culture" (Lam, 2004). Based on a collection of case studies, Lam found that while connecting with these online cultures, students, particularly English language learners, feel the freedom to engage others in newly acquired language skills. Otherwise shy and timid students were more comfortable in these online chat environments while experimenting with their new language. Allowing students time to access and use online chat with classmates, or between different classes, would create a space to allow growth in students' confidence in language use.

Another form of multimodal digital literacy can support language acquisition is the use of email communication. This tool can aid struggling writers by enabling them to practice using written language in an authentic environment. Struggling writers have the opportunity to maintain and improve their language skills as they write and interact with friends and family. English language learners are able to maintain ties with family and friends in their home countries, thereby helping to maintain their native language (Lam, 2006; Lam & Rosario-Ramos, 2009). Educators can bring this technology to the classroom, thereby giving students another tool for creating authentic written language.

Concept Construction

Struggling adolescent readers and writers can develop the ability to effectively use new concept learning obtained through digital multimodal literacies to address traditional written texts. For example, Kist (2005) describes a Canadian teacher who used video

clips effectively to teach literary devices to his struggling high school readers and writers. These students had become skilled at identifying and analyzing plot elements and author's craft in ways much like one would with traditional written texts. One student even reported to have an easier time when reading novels, and compared his interaction with the written text with how he approached his interactions with the film clips in class.

Through participation in fan fiction sites, adolescents have also been shown to develop and reinforce literacy skills important for in-school literacies. Curwood's study of adolescents participating in a *Hunger Games* fan site showed that adolescents were able to make personal connections and critically evaluate events and characters from the trilogy (Curwood, 2013). The nature of the online platform, along with adolescents' participation within the fan community, allowed for increased opportunities for students to practice these important literacy skills.

Popular media can be a powerful tool for teaching literary elements concepts, plot, and character traits in the language arts classroom. Short video clips can quickly illustrate different concepts taught within the English language art and reading curriculum. By viewing short animated videos, students can apply knowledge of literary concepts based on the plot elements and character development presented in the clip. Over the course of a school year, students can effectively defend their responses to literary skills questions when presented with traditional narrative texts.

Motivation

According to Alvermann (2002), in order to affect adolescents' achievement with literacy, educators need to take certain factors into consideration. Students come to the classroom with various degrees of strengths in regards to traditional text-based literacy. Therefore, we need to capture the students' strengths through their existing background knowledge, motivation, and interests. Their goals for reading and writing may not be directly

connected with school achievement, so educators need to tap into these existing skills in order to make literacy meaningful to the students.

Teachers often struggle finding ways to motivate and engage struggling students. However, it has been found that engaging students in media-based activities aimed at problem solving increases student motivation and enjoyment. In a study conducted by Liu, Horton, Olmanson, and Toprac (2011) with sixth grade students using a using a problem-based website designed to teach students concepts, students showed an increase in motivation and science knowledge based on pre- and post-test data. This positive correlation was found between the students' science achievement and student motivation when using the website with instruction. In an ethnographic study of adolescents engaged in Sims Writer's Hangout, one writer expressed an increase in confidence in their ability to create stories, despite her being identified as having dyslexia (Curwood, Magnifico, & Lammers, 2013). This motivated her to continue writing through the encouragement of the online fan community.

Online texts also have the potential for increasing student motivation and interest. The increase in motivation due to technology can possibly be attributed to various factors, such as the increase in control and creativity and easier readability of these texts (Leu, 2002). For example, Curwood et al.'s (2013) study of the *Neopian Times* fan site found that students were motivated by the "instant feedback" that writers received, often along with rewards provided by the fan site (p. 682).

This increase in motivation shows the potential that lies in digital literacies, especially if teachers receive training needed in order to help students improve their skills in multiliteracies, and can bridge these skills to aid in comprehending and analyzing traditional texts necessary for our current high-stakes testing environment. Although the use of technology is shown to increase student motivation, we need to be careful to not focus too much on the technology tools to drive instruction (Kist, 2005). Instead, educators should keep in mind that although technology can be a motivator for students, keeping student interest and background knowledge in mind should guide a teacher's decision for using technology.

Transferability of Skills

Transferability of skills learned and applied using digital multimodal literacies to more traditional, in-school literacies has been documented by researchers looking into the use of multiliteracies inside and outside of the classroom. As previously described, Kist (2005) conducted a study of new literacies in a high school classroom in Canada designed for at-risk students. These students learned literacy skills by viewing and analyzing film clips, and would respond to various questions addressing the mood, genre, and author's craft. Students related events in these films to more contemporary issues, connecting the stories with the world outside of the classroom. The teacher realized that his students were in fact "reading" the films, much like one would read a book or short story. These students even created videos using text features common in story lines found in traditional narrative stories. One particular student realized that as he became more used to reading films, the skills were transferring over to reading traditional texts. This student had found that reading books became easier, and that he used similar literacy skills with books that he had with film clips in his high school class.

The crossover in literary text features and elements used by adolescent during their free time shows the potential that exists in in increasing student achievement in traditional writing tasks. In an online ethnographic study conducted by Black (2008), the author participated in an online fan fiction site, fanfiction.net. The author kept detailed field notes during her participation, and had conducted interviews and exchanged emails with focal participants on the fan fiction web page as well. She discovered that participants in the online fan fiction site used narrative structures similarly found in fairy tales, action films, and popular writing, with common character traits

found within these genres (Black, 2010). In a survey conducted by Thomas (2006), participants in an online fan fiction world described ways in which they interacted and created stories as teams. These participants developed their characters by fusing fantasy elements with their own personal identities. These adolescents were able to effectively use literary allusions and personal experiences to create new narrative stories through the use of digital media. Intertextual connections between in-school and out-of-school literacies occur, as one adolescent participating in a *Hunger Games* fan site had found between the concept of "tribute" from the popular trilogy and within her American history class, ultimately sharing this connection on Twitter (Curwood et al., 2013). Through their participation in fan sites, adolescents have the ability to make connections and support in-school literacies.

Multimodal Flexibility

Recent ethnographic studies provide insight in how the multimodal flexibility provided by fan fiction sites were found to be beneficial to adolescents. Curwood's (2013) ethnographic study of adolescents participating in a fan fiction site related to the *Hunger Games* trilogy highlights how the fan site allowed students various ways to express themselves, using various fan-created texts and paratexts as stories, artwork, and videos. Similarly, Lammers' (2016) ethnographic study focused on Sims Writer's Hangout found that participants who initially engaged in one particular mode of fan-created expression, such as creating architectural renderings of buildings and homes using the Sims computer game, could be inspired by the fan community to begin creating stories, videos, and still images (Curwood et al., 2013). Participants were free to create their stories either online or offline, requesting feedback from the fan community (Lammers, 2016). Participants in the Sims Writer's Hangout could weave text with images, created within the video game, to express the stories that were inspired by the game.

Bridging Digital Multimodal Literacies with Traditional Literacies

In a typical secondary classroom, students struggle with writing for a variety of reasons. These students' difficulties can arise due to proficiency in English, a specific learning disability, or simply a lack of motivation and engagement in school. By drawing on students' existing knowledge and skills with multiliteracies, teachers can offer struggling students opportunities to communicate ideas using various modes. However, how can we use students' literacies to support traditional in-school literacies? According to Black (2009), accessing students' digital multimodal literacies can be seen not only as a "leisure-time pursuit," but as a valuable tool to help students become more successful with written language and technology skills (p. 79).

Many students who have a keen interest in film, book, or even video game characters and their related story lines have become involved in creating their own fan fiction. Fan fiction is the creation of stories based on popular media figures from film, books, or video games. Fans use existing characters, plots, and themes to create new adventures (Black, 2009). These writers are self-motivated and highly engaged in the worlds that they become a part of creating. Teachers can take advantage of students' interest in popular culture, and encourage other students to create original stories that branch from the students' own personal interests.

Although some adults worry that adolescents who create fan fiction are not actually creating any original writing, and are in actuality stealing their ideas from other sources, Jenkins (2006) likens these participants to the ways in which artists historically learned their craft. Novice artists would create their own art based on that of a master. Similarly, these novice writers are borrowing basic materials from other artists in order to "focus their energies elsewhere, mastering their craft, perfecting their skills, and communicating their ideas" (p. 182).

Creating new stories based on fan fiction allows freedom of expression; participants are not limited to the plotline and character traits presented in the original works. Students are also free to pull their own personal experiences and struggles into the storylines, such as the problems of bullying and substance abuse. Participants also have the freedom to become involved in storylines where they may otherwise be marginalized (Thomas, 2006). For instance, many female participants in fan fiction pages write female characters into storylines that traditionally may have very limited female roles. Participation in fan fiction lends itself to various forms of student self-expression, and allows for additional creativity in writing.

One way for students creating new narratives to share their work is via podcast or online fan communities. Students can also share their work on a smaller, yet still authentic scale, through a class blog or webpage accessible by invitation only. Students who struggle with language, such as English language learners and students identified with a specific learning disability, find motivation and confidence in their language skills when they create products that are shared with a wider audience. They often feel success with language when they become active participants of a community of writers, getting feedback and suggestions from peers helps them feel success with new literacy skills.

Student motivation, confidence with language, and the ability to authentically contribute to a broad audience were found to benefit students who initially struggled with written language, such as English language learners. For example, immigrant students' need to become active members of American society may begin with an interest in popular culture (Black, 2009). Helping students create narrative fiction that can be shared with the class or online also makes learning authentic and helps develop the student's identity as a part of a social, online community.

Students can create video narratives, which can be shared with the class and/or broadcast over the Internet to a wider audience. Youtube has become a great resource for helping students tell video stories and create video blogs, making their writing an authentic means of communication and entertainment. Students create transcripts that can be a collaborative, social learning experience, helping struggling writers, such as English language learners, practice written and oral language skills (Smythe & Neufeld, 2010). Working collaboratively, students revise and edit their narratives to reach their target audiences. The authenticity of the video narrative increases student motivation to create interesting, accurately written texts for broadcast. Encouraging students to create original narratives based on personal interests and popular media is a great way to pull students in to using literacy in a new and genuine way. The creation of these narratives can help struggling students build accuracy in their written language and language fluency, as well as confidence in their own personal writing ability.

Student-Created Fan Fiction

Here is one way that teachers can create a space for producing fan fiction in the middle or high-school classroom. The following is a two-week writing project that I used with my seventh graders.

Step 1: What Do You Know?
Have students individually brainstorm their own ideas based on what they know and identify with (see Appendix). These ideas can come from, but are not limited to:

- Television
- Film
- Video games
- Books
- Viral Videos
- Song lyrics

Allow time for students to share their lists in a group and with the class. Encourage students to add to their list of ideas during this time.

Step 2: Topic Selection

Students can identify their top three choices, and then decide which topic would be best for creating their fan fiction. Encourage students with shared interests to work in pairs or groups. This support can encourage reluctant writers to engage in creating new stories alongside more confident peers. Students who prefer to work alone should be provided that opportunity; some students are most comfortable working independently.

Step 3: Storyboarding

Have groups and individuals create a storyboard to help them plan and create their new narrative. This will also allow the teacher to check the student's narrative for appropriateness and plot development. A variety of storyboard formats can be used. A few examples are found at: storyboardthat.com, www.boords.com, pixton.com, or kedt.pbslearningmedia.org/tools/storyboard.

Step 4: Mode or Media Choice

Allow students to choose how they wish to present their narrative. This helps not only develop their narrative writing skills, but honors a wider range of modalities in which students can create and present their new stories. Some popular choices are:

● Comic strips

● Screenplay and skits

● Puppet show

● Written narrative

Students can then use their storyboards to help create their stories (see Figure 1). It is helpful to allow students the freedom to use technology to develop their plot, characters, or clarify questions they have about their chosen writing topic (see Figure 2).

Step 5: Presentation and Publishing

At the end of the unit, allow students to present their new narratives to the class. Figure 3 illustrates an excerpt from one group's comic strip based on the popular animated series *Adventure Time.* This particular comic strip contained seven full pages of comic strip cells. Students collaborated on the comic strip during class time, and even chose to work on pieces of their project at outside of class. They then shared their final project with the class.

Figure 4 presents an excerpt of one student's written narrative based on her favorite book series. This particular student chose to work independently, and at the end of two weeks completed five single-spaced typed pages of her draft.
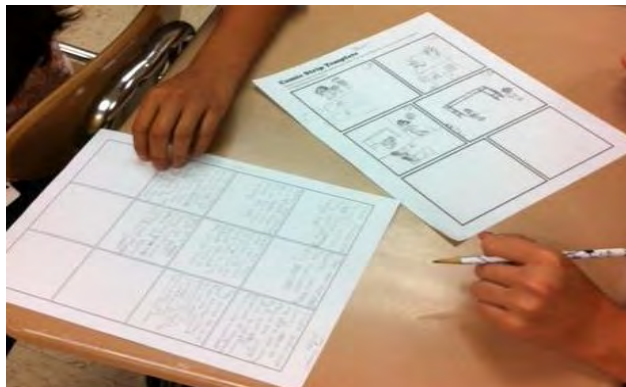

Figure 1. Comic strip development

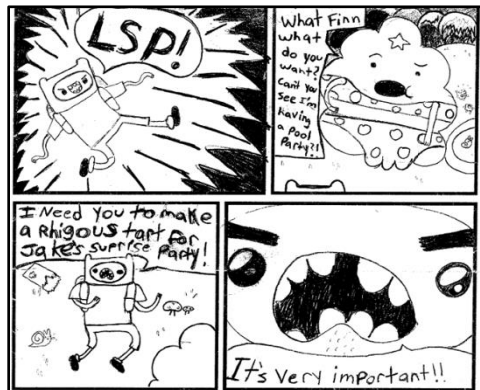*Figure 2*. Technology support

Figure 3. Comic strip excerpt.

The Winter Night Gala

The bellows rang throughout the 18th century style Birmingham, England. It was December 1st and all of the shop keepers, paupers, and welders where setting up concession stands hoping to sell all of their glorious and or delicious products. Inside a small shop was a girl watching all of the commotion in little interest, her name was Eliza Maddington, she lives with her aunt and uncle, both of which ignore her.

"Hey you ignorant girl," says her not so kind aunt Launda, "hurry and finish cleaning, we're opening shop soon and I don't wish the costumers to be leaving because of the mess." Eliza just nodded and started sweeping just as a man with a fancy suit and tie walked in. Eliza quickly got behind the counter. "What may I do for you sir?" Eliza asked, all the man did was smile and pull out an official looking envelope from his coat pocket. "Well young miss," the man started "I've come on official business, you see I've been investigating a disappearance that's been going on for at least 16 years." *16* thought Eliza who was the exact same age. "Well what is it sir?" she asked. The man smiled and handed Eliza the envelope. Eliza opened it and began to read what was written *"Dear Eliza Maddinton, it appears you are the lost princess of the kingdom. We have sent a messenger to tell you this, we hope to see you soon. Singed, King George."*

Figure 4. Narrative example.

To provide even more of an authentic audience, allow students to publish their work on a class or school webpage, or encourage students to find a broader audience through one of the many online sites targeted for fan fiction. Some popular fan fiction sites are Fan Fiction (http://fanfiction.net), Quote TV (https://www.quotev.com/fanfic), and Wattpad (https://www.wattpad.com/stories/fanfiction). Other sites that provide an outlet for publishing and sharing fan fiction include Goodreads (https://www.goodreads.com/story/tag/fanfiction) and Tumblr (https://www.tumblr.com/tagged/fanfic).

Conclusion

Students interact with language in vastly different ways compared to twenty years ago. Through students' interactions with social networking, online communication, fan fiction, video editing, music, and art, students are quite capable of interacting with language in very sophisticated ways. Teachers need to tap into these skills so that struggling readers can develop identities as successful writers.

The fan fiction project described above took place at the end of the academic year, after the State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness (STAAR) reading and writing assessments were complete. While this time of the school year teachers may find it difficult to encourage students to engage in reading or writing, student excitement for writing during this end-of-year time was high. Students entered the classroom eager to write, and excitedly asked if they would get to work on their projects. Even students who had struggled or were reluctant to engage in writing, such as the student who wrote the five-page narrative above, created written narratives that contradicted their earlier resistance to writing.

Teachers strive to help struggling students reach their potential. We need to use innovative methods in order to reach out to these students, whose true strengths are often not acknowledged or utilized by school. Educators can provide a bridge that can link those literacy skills that the students often use on a daily basis and help them gain success in the classroom.

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Appendix

List Your Favorites

Movies:	TV:
Books:	Video Games:
Cartoons/ animation:	Other: