Online Fan Fiction and Critical Media Literacy

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Abstract

This article explores English-language-learning (ELL) youths' engagement with popular media through composing and publicly posting stories in an online fan fiction writing space. Fan fiction is a genre that lends itself to critical engagement with media texts as fans repurpose popular media to design their own narratives. Analyses describe how three ELL youth employ creative agency as they fashion fan fiction stories that are relevant to their own lives. Findings reveal that contemporary participatory media, such as fan fiction writing, involve sophisticated forms of literacy that can serve as useful resources for promoting in-class learning. However, the study also suggests that students would benefit from expert guidance in the areas of critical consumption and production of media and digital texts. (Keywords: critical media literacy, 21st-century skills, popular culture)

Literacy in the 21st-Century

The rapid technological advances in recent decades have prompted institutions of formal learning to reconsider their goals and responsibilities in the 21st century. Professional associations such as the International Reading Association (2001) and the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) (2008), and consortia such as the Partnership for 21st Century Skills (2004), have started to develop 21st-century skills frameworks and curriculum maps. These materials include curricula, assessment strategies, and teaching practices aimed at the development of so-called 21st-century and digital-literacy skills. It has been suggested that such skills are increasingly important for successful participation in modern work, school, and play environments.

A common message across the 21st-century skills literature is that traditional literacy skills, such as reading, writing, speaking, and listening, are just starting points for effective participation in a society saturated with new media and technologies. According to the NCTE (2008):

> As society and technology change, so does literacy. Because technology has increased the intensity and complexity of literate environments, the twenty-first century demands that a literate person possess a wide range of abilities and competencies, many literacies. These literacies—from reading online newspapers to participating in virtual classrooms—are multiple, dynamic, and malleable. (n.p.)

As the above passage indicates, contemporary contexts require a flexible skill set that extends beyond print-based literacy to include navigating new technologies; using digital tools to communicate, form relationships, and collaborate across contexts; designing and sharing information via digital texts; locating, analyzing, and synthesizing electronic information; and recognizing the complex ethical dimensions of online environments (NCTE, 2008, n.p.).

In spite of this emerging emphasis on the importance of a range of literate proficiencies, as Skinner and Hagood (2008) point out, national policies, state standards, and local mandates related to education still retain an almost exclusive focus on academic literacies, such as "decoding and reading comprehension of print-based texts; written composition of academic texts, and oral fluency with Standard English grammar and vocabulary" (p. 13). In short, literacy instruction in schools is often grounded in a 20th-century conception of literacy as academic, linear, print-based, and book-bound. This situation is exacerbated for ELLs, who often are relegated to classroom activities focused on teaching discrete elements of print-based English language skills.

Critical Media Literacy

The ubiquity of on- and offline media in students' lives also brings the need for another 21st-century skill, critical media literacy, into sharp focus. In an era of increased media saturation and rampant consumerism, it is crucial that youth develop tools for critically engaging with the copious amounts of information and ideological material they are confronted with on a daily basis. In the following excerpt, globalization theorist Arjun Appadurai (1996) describes how global flows of media content—what he calls *mediascapes*—play an increasingly central role in the lives that individuals envision for themselves and for others.

> Mediascapes, whether produced by private or state interests, tend to be image-centered, narrative-based accounts of strips of reality, and what they offer to those who experience and transform them is a series of elements (such as characters, plots, and textual forms), out of which scripts can be formed of imagined lives, their own as well as those of others living in other places. These scripts can and do get disaggregated into complex sets of metaphors by which people live. (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, cited in Appadurai, 1996, p. 35–36)

Popular media offer up a wealth of possibilities for envisioning different lifestyles, professions, political affiliations, and personal relationships. However, as Appadurai points out, these "possible" lives are much more attainable for some than others, as geographic location, local custom, and financial resources can greatly constrain individuals' access to the life worlds represented in modern media. Moreover, these media representations often are rooted in ideologies that merit critical interrogation. These points underscore the notion that it is increasingly important for youth to develop skills for critically consuming media texts, as well as for responsibly producing their own digital media for online publication.

It is also important to note that the critical consumption of media and popular culture may be a particularly important skill for immigrant

students and first-generation ELLs to develop. Research has suggested that these youth may draw heavily from mainstream culture as it is depicted in the media (e.g., television, movies, magazines, advertisements) in their efforts to assimilate and belong and as they construct their identities in a new cultural and linguistic context (Feliciano, 2006, cited in Brzoska, 2009).

Drawing on data from a three-year ethnographic study, this article explores critical media literacy within the context of an online fan fiction writing space. Fan fiction, or fan-authored stories based on existing media, is a genre that lends itself to critical engagement with media texts as fans repurpose these media to create their own narratives. Analyses will focus on the many ways that three ELL youth employ creative agency as they create fan fiction texts that are relevant to their own lives. However, findings suggest that, in spite of the sophistication of many such participatory media practices, students would benefit from expert guidance in developing 21st-century proficiencies related to critical consumption and production of media and digital texts.

New Literacy Studies

This article is grounded in a new literacy studies (NLS) perspective that challenges the aforementioned notion of print-based, book-bound literacy and instead emphasizes the contextual nature of literacy as a communicative practice that is deeply rooted in specific social, historical, and political milieus (Gee, 1996; Lankshear & Knobel, 2006; Street, 1984). For more than a decade, proponents of the NLS have attempted to broaden our conceptions of literacy to account for what they call *multiliteracies*. This includes the cultural and linguistic diversity of our increasingly globalized societies as well as the variety of text forms associated with information and multimedia technologies.

As proponents of the NLS have pointed out (Gee, 1999; Lankshear & Knobel, 2006), online leisure environments such as online fan fiction writing sites play an increasingly central role in contemporary youths' literacy development and informal learning experiences. Such spaces provide opportunities for many youth to not only form social connections and play but also develop expertise in sophisticated topics and new literacies that are relevant to youths' daily lives (Alvermann, 2002). Moreover, the participatory nature of online spaces and the ease of online content creation are breaking down traditional distinctions between producers and consumers of media content and offering the general public unprecedented opportunities for authoring in public spaces (Jenkins, 2006).

Unfortunately, these activities are often dismissed as frivolous or unrelated to school-based learning. However, as this article will argue, the proficiencies and dispositions that students develop through such activities have many potential connections to traditional academic tasks in classroom environments and can serve as a point of connection to facilitate classroom learning and engagement, particularly in the area of critical media literacy. In fact, for many so-called "Net Generation" youth, critical engagement with social issues and civic literacy begins with informal experiences around participatory media (Jenkins, 2006). Examples of such participatory media include online publishing environments such as blogs, wikis, fiction-writing sites, online journals (Blogger, Wikipedia, Fictionpress, Livejournal), video- and file-sharing sites (YouTube), as well as social networking sites (Facebook, Myspace). In these spaces, youth engage in multiple forms of self-expression that often involve taking on, representing, and defending specific values and perspectives.

Design

In its manifesto calling for increased attention to new and multiliteracies brought about by widespread globalization and technological change, the New London Group (NLG) (1996) proposes the concept of design as a framework for understanding all semiotic processes of meaning making, "including using language to produce or consume texts" (NLG, 1996, n.p.). Their framework of design is used in this article to describe the process of meaning making that youth engage in as they produce online fan fiction texts. According to the NLG, design includes three elements that emphasize the active and dynamic nature of meaning making: *available designs, designing*, and *the redesigned*.

Available designs, put simply, are all the semiotic resources available for meaning making. This includes resources such as language, film, photographs, movement, and sound. Available designs also encompass *orders of discourse* (Fairclough, 1995, cited in NLG, 1996). An order of discourse refers to "the structured set of conventions associated with semiotic activity" (NLG, 1996, n.p.) in a particular context. For example, a classroom may have a structured set of conventions associated with using language in that space, such as explicit rules about how to express politeness (e.g. ,saying "please" and "thank you"), or how to present the required materials for certain assignments, or implicit rules for how to gain the teacher's attention or answer questions in ways that are recognized as valuable by the teacher. These types of conventions may differ greatly from those of workplaces, centers of worship, as well as community and play spaces. It is also important to note that orders of discourse are grounded in various social, institutional, and historical relations and are associated with different genres and styles of interacting. Thus, "in designing texts and interactions, people always draw on systems of sociolinguistic practice as well as grammatical systems" (NLG, 1996, n.p.).

Designing is the process of drawing from available designs to construct new meanings and representations of the world. Listening, speaking, reading, and writing are all examples of designing, as an individual takes in or utilizes available semiotics resources and then uses his/her own resources (linguistic, cognitive, semiotic) and life experiences to translate the available designs into the redesigned. Thus, the redesigned is the new meaning that results from combining socially, historically, and culturally situated available designs with an individual's own "cultural resources and uniquely positioned subjectivity" (NLG, 1996, n.p.). At this point, the redesigned then becomes an available design that others may use as a new resource for making meaning.

Critical interrogation, redesigning texts, and pushing the boundaries of media are common in the ethos of many fan communities. As an illustration, in their study of youths' literacy practices across contexts, Chandler-Olcott and Mahar (2003) focus on the literacy practices inspired by Japanese animation, or *anime*, of two adolescent fans, Rhiannon and Eileen. In these articles, the authors describe how the young women drew from various media texts to construct their own fictions with "gender-bending" plotlines and heroines in starring roles, albeit roles that eventually came into conflict with discourses about heterosexual relationships. Nonetheless, Chandler-Olcott and Mahar (2003) emphasize how, in spite of the derivative nature of these stories, the texts were means for these young women to use media texts to participate in "an ongoing, intertextual conversation about such issues as friendship, loyalty, power, and sexuality" (p. 583).

Thomas' ethnographic work (2005, 2006) also describes how female adolescents use fan fiction texts and collaborative writing activities to create safe discursive spaces for sharing and discussing their various life perspectives. For instance, Thomas describes how two focal participants, Tiana and Jandalf, develop narrative representations of themselves, or autobiographical characters known within the fan fiction community as "Mary Sues," that assist them in understanding past experiences and in "forging new identities" (Thomas, 2005, p. 30). Much like Rhiannon and Eileen from Chandler-Olcott and Mahar's (2003) study, these young women also used their fan fictions to reconfigure gendered identities by casting female fan fiction characters in many of the "hero" roles that are traditionally occupied by men in popular media. Thus, they were able to draw from available resources to create fictions that gave voice to themes and issues from their daily lives and relationships.

Study

Data for this article come from a longitudinal study (Black, 2008) of ELL youth composing and reading fan fiction texts on a Web site called fanfiction.net (FFN). Fan fictions are stories written by fans about media such as books, television, movies, and video games. However, rather than strictly following the blueprint of the original media or available designs, fan fiction authors generally extend, challenge, and redesign the plotlines and characterizations offered by the media. For example, a fan fiction author might construct a romantic relationship between two male characters in the Harry Potter series, place the characters from a popular Japanese anime series in an alternate setting such as a U.S. high school, or cast a peripheral female character from a television series as a heroine for his/her text. In this way, rather than passively consuming media texts (Jenkins, 1992), fans are able to draw from their own knowledge, experiences, and interests to construct interpretations and scenarios that differ from those offered via mainstream media. Their redesigned fan fiction texts are then added to the online canon, or *fanon*, of fan-created literature and become a resource that other fans may draw from in developing their own unique stories.

FFN is the largest online fan fiction archive, currently housing more than a million fan-authored texts that span thousands of media categories. For example, approximately 40,000 texts are based on the Final Fantasy video game, 50,000 texts are based on the Yu-Gi-Oh! anime series, and nearly 400,000 texts are based on the Harry Potter series of books. In terms of education and literacy research, this site warrants attention for several reasons. First, the vast majority of these texts are written by adolescents from different countries, many of whom claim to dislike English class, writing, and/or reading yet devote countless hours to writing and reading on the site. Second, activity in FFN focuses on literate activities that are aligned with practices that schools value and promote. For instance, fans publicly post their stories on FFN, and then audience members read and offer feedback, or reviews, of these texts. Thus, these youth are engaged in a public process of composition, peer review, and revision. Also, many fans engage in meta-discussion of writing/reading-related topics, such as how to effectively integrate dialogue into stories, how to "show, not tell" when writing, and how to provide effective peer feedback on stories, to name just a few.

The author used ethnographic (Geertz, 1973, Hine, 2000) approaches, such as participant observation, artifact collection, and field-note generation, to create a "thick description" (Geertz, 1973) of site activity during a three-year period. Data discussed in this article come primarily from case studies of three ELL focal participants, Grace, Cherry-chan, and Nanako (all names are pseudonyms). These three young women were in distinct life situations as learners of English. Grace lives in the Philippines, grew up speaking Kampangan (her first language used at home), shortly thereafter began learning Filipino (a standardized version of Tagalog used in the community and in schools), and began learning English at age 7 (primarily for written activities in school). Cherry-Chan is a second-generation immigrant to North America whose family moved from Taiwan to Canada before she was born. Cherry-Chan grew up speaking Mandarin Chinese and Taiwanese at home and used English in the community and at school. Nanako is a generation 1.5 immigrant who moved to North America from Shanghai, China, with her parents when she was 11. Her first language is Mandarin Chinese, which she speaks at home with her family, and she began learning English after moving to North America. These young women's distinct cultural and linguistic backgrounds, as well as their current living situations, provided different available designs and orders of discourse for them to draw from and also shaped their processes of designing new texts in unique ways.

Primary data sources included participants' fan fiction texts, reader reviews of these texts, and interviews with focal participants. The author

used discourse analytic (Fairclough, 1995; Gee, 1999) methods to conduct analyses of participants' processes of design. For example, texts were initially coded in terms of available designs. This included a focus on how the intertextual elements (e.g., allusions to and/or borrowings from mainstream media), genres, and styles used by participants referenced social, cultural, and/or political elements of larger orders of discourse. Next, the author coded texts in terms of the process of designing. This included a focus on how participants, as ELLs, used their own cultural, linguistic, cognitive, and semiotic resources, as well as their life experiences and desires, to translate the available designs into redesigned texts. This stage of coding also reflected the tensions that often arose between the orders of discourse of the available designs and the new meanings of the redesigned texts.

It is important to note that, although this article is based on data from in-depth case studies of ELL youths' literacy practices in an online writing environment, the purpose of this analysis is not to depict detailed ethnographic accounts of these individual learners' experiences. Rather, the focus of this article is to discuss their textual practices in relation to critical media literacy. In particular, analyses and discussion will address the following questions:

1. How do these youth draw from available designs in the construction of their fan fiction texts?

2. Do their processes of redesign reflect critical engagement with media?

3. How might these processes relate to the teaching of critical media skills in classroom learning environments?

Analysis

Redesigning Mediascapes

In his seminal work on fans and participatory culture, Jenkins (1992) describes how fans "play with the rough spots of the text—its narrative gaps, its excess details, its loose ends and contradictions—in order to find openings for [their] elaborations of its world and speculations about characters" (p. 74). In this way, fan fiction provides a means for fans to actively contribute modern mediascapes to make media more congruent with their expectations and life worlds. As an example, Grace explains that she often writes fan fiction because "I love those series, and I know some of the readers wants to read some of um... let's see *alternative* story?" (interview, 2006). She goes on to say, "Thank God for Fanfics. Even though Seiya and Usagi (Sailormoon) did not end together in series, there are some fanfics that put them together … and its making us their fans … satisfied" (interview, 2006). Thus, Grace uses her texts to construct alternatives to the original media narratives; moreover, these alternative or redesigned narratives are welcomed by many members of the fan community because they are more consistent with their own desires in terms of plot trajectories.

Fan fiction writing also provides youth with the opportunity to shift the foci of contemporary mediascapes and situate them within the context of their own experiences. To illustrate, all three of the young women discussed in this article use their fan fiction stories as narrative forums for voicing concerns from their everyday lives. For instance, Grace's stories draw from the available designs of anime texts that in turn are grounded in Eastern spiritual traditions and related orders of discourse (e.g., Hinduism, Buddhism, mantras, mudras). However, in redesigning her texts, Grace often drew from her life experiences and goals as a born again Christian. Thus, her stories were infused with themes, vocabulary, and ways of using language (e.g., blessings, prayers, Biblical styles of text) that are associated with Christianity. By drawing from the available resources of both the anime and Christian texts, Grace was able to create redesigned

stories that presented what she viewed as desirable alternatives to the lifestyle and moral choices depicted in popular anime as well as Western media. Moreover, Grace consciously wanted her audience to draw from her fictions as available designs that might influence their thinking and further promote the tenets of Christianity.

Cherry-Chan's fan fictions also drew from the available designs of anime texts, as she incorporated the characters, settings, and Asian cultural and linguistic elements from the existing media into her own stories. However, in the process of designing her fictions, Cherry-Chan challenged mainstream media representations of romance and sexuality by writing *yaoi* or *shōnen ai* fictions. Yaoi fictions are generally composed by female authors and depict very close romantic, but not sexual, relationships between young men. Early academic writing that focused on female fan fiction authors developing romantic relationships between men theorized such stories as "a means by which these fans were able to project their own feminine romantic and sexual fantasies onto the male characters" (Russ, 1985; Lam & Veith, 1986; Bacon-Smith, 1992, cited in Jenkins, 1992). In addition to offering a safe space for exploring themes related to sexuality, these texts also offered alternative narrative possibilities for relationships and presented different options for gender roles.

As another example, Nanako's texts were based on characters from various anime series, but she also drew from other available media resources, such as Western-origin movies (e.g., *You've Got Mail*), books (e.g., *Memoirs of a Geisha*), and music (e.g., "Cry" by Mandy Moore and "Whole Again" by Atomic Kitten), and combined these media with her own narratives to create redesigned hybrid texts known as moviefictions and songfictions. As an ELL, drawing from the available designs of these various media acted as scaffolding for her development of writing skills by providing pre-existing characters and narrative frameworks to guide her writing. In addition, she was able to rely on readers' familiarity with these popular media to assist them in comprehending the messages of her stories.

Nanako's texts also reflected the tensions of being an Asian female growing up in a North American context. For instance, many of her stories were grounded in orders of discourse related to patriarchal society and Asian familial structures. Thus, as she approached adulthood, her stories increasingly depicted various anime characters confronting the challenges of arranged marriage and dealt with related topics such as the duties of firstborn sons and the responsibilities of daughters in Asian families. In this way, Nanako's fan fiction texts served as a means of problematizing patriarchal societal structures, particularly within Asian cultures. Also, by creating some independent female heroines for her stories, Nanako also disputed popular media depictions of women in general, and Asian women in particular, as helpless and dependent on men.

As these examples demonstrate, some youth already are using out-of-school spaces to engage in the creative appropriation and redesign of mainstream media texts. These activities are aligned with the Partnership for 21st Century Skills' (2004) outline of media literacy proficiencies, which suggest that students should be able to "examine how individuals interpret messages differently, how values and points of view are included or excluded, and how media can influence beliefs and behaviors" (n.p.). Many of Grace, Cherry-Chan, and Nanako's fan-fiction stories reflect a self-initiated form of critical inquiry into the dominant media narratives and orders of discourse that permeate their daily lives by rewriting these texts to incorporate values and perspectives they feel are missing. In addition, Grace and Nanako both consciously use their texts as a means of influencing the beliefs and behaviors of their readers—Grace by "ministering" to her audience through her Christian texts, and Nanako by using her stories to teach about Chinese and Japanese history and to emphasize the rich cultural practices and beauty of Asian countries.

It is also worth noting that by redesigning these texts and then posting them in a public forum where audience members are able to comment on their stories, fan-fiction authors also gain firsthand exposure to how individuals, especially those from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, can interpret messages differently—another 21st-century media literacy skill. As one example, when Nanako was first writing on FFN and had been living in North America for only a little more than two years, the ending of one of her fictions created some controversy that broke down along cultural and religious lines. In the story, one of the characters died, and at the end, his spouse committed suicide out of sadness and was transported to heaven. Some of Nanako's readers immediately posted reviews that took issue with this representation of suicide. These reviews were grounded in Christianity as well as a Western perspective on suicide, essentially arguing that suicide is never an acceptable option and that people who commit suicide are unable to go to heaven because it is considered a sin.

For Nanako, a non-Christian who spent much of her young life in China, this was an unexpected interpretation of what she viewed as a beautiful and tragic ending to her story. In the days that followed, Nanako and her readers shared their beliefs and took moral stances on this issue. Not surprisingly, neither side was persuaded to the other's point of view; however, both Nanako and her readers gained potentially valuable insight into cultural and religious perspectives that differed from their own and achieved some understanding of how individuals may react to and interpret texts differently.

In spite of the critical leanings in many of the aforementioned fan-fiction texts, some elements of these young women's stories remain deeply problematic. For example, although both Grace and Nanako have developed plots centered on independent and successful female heroines, they have both also created stories that draw from available designs and orders of discourse promoting sexist viewpoints that warrant critical interrogation. Many of these texts clearly reflect generic conventions that are common in fairy tales, novels, and action-adventure movies, with stereotypical representations of females as weak and in need of a male savior and valuable only in terms of their sexual and ornamental worth. As another example, one of Cherry-Chan's texts depicts an alcohol-influenced date rape between two anime characters. This scenario is largely unquestioned by the audience, with one reader even suggesting that the rapist was not at fault because he was drunk.

Discussion

Although the critical tendencies commonly found in some fan fiction texts are an encouraging sign that youth are envisioning narrative possibilities and alternative viewpoints to those presented in mainstream media, they only scratch the surface of the necessary media literacy proficiencies outlined by the Partnership for 21st Century Skills' (2004). Other crucial skills include "understand[ing] both how and why media messages are constructed, and for what purposes," "apply[ing] a fundamental understanding of the ethical/legal issues surrounding the access and use of media under the rubric of analyzing media," "understand[ing] and utiliz[ing] the most appropriate media creation tools, characteristics and conventions," and "understand[ing] and effectively utiliz[ing] the most appropriate expressions and interpretations in diverse, multi-cultural environments" under the rubric of creating media products (2004, n.p.). The aforementioned examples point to a clear need for youth to have opportunities for engaging in critical discussion of the various texts they encounter, not only in their day-to-day lives, but also in their academic lives. Teachers are the clear choice for guiding these critical discussions and offering up their expertise with media, adult perspectives, and world knowledge as a means of calling attention to potentially problematic aspects, not only of media but also of student-produced texts.

As the genre of online fan fiction aptly demonstrates, new technologies have profoundly affected access to public authorship. It is important for students to realize that with this access to public authorship also comes a responsibility for the messages and materials that one promotes. Rheingold (2008) suggests that students' out-of-school experiences with self-representation in online spaces can serve as a basis for making the transition from public to private voices. Specifically, in online leisure spaces, many youth tend to use personal and informal forms of address, or *private voices*. When using these private voices, youth assume an audience of familiars and are often uncritical about the messages and materials they post online. This is clearly problematic when employers and potential employers, admissions committee members, school administrators, law enforcement officials, and the general public have access to these materials. Thus, another critical media literacy skill for the 21st century is developing strong, critical, and responsible *public voices* that will help students make informed choices about the content they post online, and to have the greatest positive impact through such content. Rheingold (2008) suggests that voice is a means of connecting youths' enthusiasm for online interaction and self-representation with "their potential engagement with society as citizens" (p. 101) and that "[m]oving from a private to a public voice can help students turn their self-expression into a form of public participation" (p. 101). Thus, educators could build on students' experiences with self-representation in online spaces to help them develop effective and responsible public voices.

In addition, drawing from youth's prior knowledge of voicing their opinions and representing themselves in online spaces can also be a valuable resource for scaffolding student participation in critical discussions of social and civic issues. This can be especially important for immigrant students who often feel out of place participating in these sorts of discussions in their new host countries. For instance, in fan fiction communities, many adolescent fans set themselves in opposition to copyright laws, claiming that fan fiction texts fall under "fair-use" guidelines (Lewis, Black, & Tomlinson, 2009). These youth promote values related to the creative appropriation and transformation of existing media texts and eschew the institutional and consumerist principles related to copyright. In their efforts to defend fan fiction writing practices, youth often conduct research on copyright law and fair-use guidelines, post essays promoting their perspectives, and engage in online debates regarding the veracity of their positions. Moreover, students engage in similar practices as they create persuasive YouTube videos in response to current events and promote particular agendas when they create groups on social networking sites. The skills associated with such activities—perspective taking, locating information, and persuading—are among those required for effective engagement in civil society and are clearly related to desirable school-based learning and literacy skills. Helping students draw parallels between what these genres and skills look like in leisure versus academic environments can be a valuable tool for scaffolding learning and engagement.

Conclusion

It might be tempting to dismiss activities such as fan fiction writing as leisure-time pursuits that have little relationship to academic content. However, as discussion from this article demonstrates, popular media and new technologies can provide a basis for ELL youth to develop valuable print literacy as well as 21st-century skills. Many youth today are accustomed to participating in online, extracurricular contexts in which they take on active roles as creators and communicators of knowledge. Lessons based on popular culture can offer a wealth of opportunities for encouraging students to critically engage in broader discussions about the ways that mass media construct various cultural, gender, and social roles; promote particular representations of the world; and position youth as consumers.

Building on the sort of activities and literacy practices that many youth are accustomed to engaging with in their leisure time also can help ELL students draw from prior knowledge to contextualize and develop understandings of new language forms and content. Such activities are a means of building on students' identities as active designers rather than passive consumers of the content and available designs that they encounter in the world and can help them to make responsible choices about the materials that they publicly post in online spaces. This is a crucial aspect of helping students understand the social construction of knowledge and can be used to foster a willingness to critically engage with information presented not only in media and classroom texts, but also in broader social and civic contexts. Moreover, it can support ELL youth in developing identities as powerful learners, language users, and active designers of their own social, cultural, and ideological materials rather than passive recipients of the available designs of the host culture.

Acknowledgments

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