Contrasting Visions: identity, literacy, and boundary work in a fan community

KSENIA A. KOROBKOVA & REBECCA W. BLACK
Graduate School of Education, University of California, Irvine, USA

ABSTRACT This article focuses on learning and identity-related practices of young female fans of a popular British boy band called One Direction. Drawing on qualitative inquiry into a fanfiction community formed around the band, analysis highlights (a) the literate work fans engage in, including writing, reading, critiquing, and collaborating on multimodal texts, (b) identity work performed by the fans with respect to what it means to be a true fan, a teen, and an effective writer within this community, and (c) ways in which the literate and identity work weave together to inform participation and identification in the One Direction fanfiction community, creating both links and ruptures between young people’s out-of-school and in-school spaces. Analyses center on the ways the fans themselves define their involvement, with a focus on subgroup identities. Interview data highlight the ways fans used linguistic, technological, and social resources to stake out certain identities and to negotiate status within the site. Although power-laden dynamics defined community participation, fans felt ownership over their literacy and identity production practices, often drawing a contrast to school practices. We then discuss the meanings youth make of their fan practices and their contrastive experiences in fan and school spaces, connecting study findings to current debates on the import of pop culture in formal schooling.

Introduction

As digital media and participatory technologies gain currency in our everyday lives and imaginations, they are also gaining traction in our approaches to understanding the literate experiences of today’s learners. In the last two decades particularly, literacy researchers have turned their attention to exploring literacy development in the context of young people’s media-inflected daily lives. Scholars from various disciplines (e.g. Gee, 2000; Hull & Schultz, 2001; Pahl & Rowsell, 2005, 2006), have also taken an interest in ways in which digital media has transformed the literate practices of youth both in school and out-of-school environments. Comparatively less research has focused on how young people themselves conceptualize their engagements with learning and digital media. Thus, in this article we focus on young people’s discursive construction of the relevance, meaning, and importance of their practices in fan spaces, in relation to their academic lives. By chronicling young people’s engagement in the production of stories and pictures about One Direction, a popular British boyband, on a mobile device-based story-sharing online community called Wattpad, we focus on how youth construct and narrate multiple identity stances related to their fan practices.

Fan communities have long been studied as sites of audience activity and creative appropriations of mass media (Fiske, 1989; Jenkins, 1992), and the last few decades have witnessed a rise of interest in fan communities as sites of literate, cultural, and political production (Gee, 2003; Black, 2006; Curwood et al, 2013). More recently, scholars aligned with digital media and learning research communities have argued that fans also create valuable informal learning spaces, in which fans learn and practice valuable skills while engaging with the object of their fandom. Often,
affinity spaces like fan sites allow young fans to develop positive literacy identities (Rogoff, 1990) and views of themselves as creative agents. Unfortunately, in many fans’ narratives of their creative activities, these possible identity moves in the affinity space ecologies are contrasted rather than aligned with the ecology of formal learning environments like school.

Drawing from theory and research on literacy, discourse, and identity, this study makes use of the concepts of boundary and identity work in order to shed light on the social processes that connect identities and literacies. Creators of boy band fan stories and related media artifacts on Wattpad occupied different roles (e.g. editor, Photoshop expert) and took up different identity stances (e.g. knowledgeable fan, serious writer, friend) while engaging in their community. In fact, fans defined participation within this particular online community by simultaneous experiences of finding a common ground with others and defining themselves as separate, by commonality and distinction, by othering and being othered. These experiences, in turn, mediated the young people’s literacy practices and uses of texts. Fans’ narratives speak to the importance of creating and maintaining identity-related boundaries for the participants, by the participants, juxtaposing a kind of self-determined, creative space with that of the traditional classroom, where boundaries are often imposed by an adult of power and underwritten by an identity hierarchy (student/teacher; speaker/listener). Echoing Gee’s differentiation between institutional and affinity identities (2003), participants highlighted the importance of being able to author, distinguish, and position themselves in a rich fan ecology in ways that are starkly different from classroom ecologies where identities, borders, and content worlds are other-imposed. These kinds of ecological dynamics could have implications for the design of both classroom and affinity spaces and instruct us to tread lightly when considering appropriating subcultural affinity space ecology into classrooms.

Theoretical Framework

Literacy Redefined

Sociocultural theorists of literacy posit that what it means to be literate must be understood within a local cultural context. One example of this thinking is a school of thought called the New Literacy Studies (NLS), a movement ‘based on the view that reading and writing only make sense when studied in the context of social and cultural practices of which they are but a part’ (Gee, 2000). These social practices include the construction of knowledge, values, and attitudes associated with the reading and writing of particular texts within particular contexts (Street, 1984; Baynham, 1995; Barton & Hamilton, 1998).

What is considered literate depends on what the members of that context consider to be appropriate, and is made visible in the actions they take, what they accept and reject as preferred responses of others, and how they engage with, interpret, and construct text (Heath, 1982; Bloome, 1983; Heap, 1991; Castanheira et al, 2001). Within the current study, being recognized as a particular kind of fan involved mobilizing specific epistemic, linguistic, and literate resources. Asserting yourself as an authentic One Direction (1D) fangirl meant having deep, personal knowledge of the band members and their music, correctly using acronyms, slang, and memes about the band, and engaging in a discourse of emotion when talking about the band. Specific knowledges and ways of talking became identity markers participants brought up in conversations about being a fangirl or ‘fangirling’ in a particular instance. To be literate and knowledgeable as a fangirl, one must be steeped in particular discourses.

Discourse and Identity

‘Discourses’ point to ‘ways of being in the world, or forms of life which integrate words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes, social identities, as well as gestures, glances, body positions, and clothes’ (Gee, 1990, p. 142). In this way, discourses are also ways of displaying membership in social groups. They may be considered ‘identity kits’ with highly specific instructions of appropriate behavior one must follow so as to take on a particular social role recognizable to others. By participating in a discourse, that is, to be literate in it, one cannot help but promote an identity.

Through literacy practices, individuals demonstrate their ownership and authorship of texts while making sense of, and manifesting, their identities, which may not be immediately accessible
Contrasting Visions

to outsiders. Literacy and identity are mutually constitutive processes constantly negotiated by members of the discourse. This notion of the negotiation of identity through discourse served as a lens to analyze the various ‘hats’ Wattpad users wore on the site, and to understand how various literate and technological resources helped them to ‘stake out’ different identities. For instance, staking out the identity of a friend in this space often involved social actions like reading another’s story, commenting on it, and inviting the other person into your personal friend network on Wattpad. Deepening this friend connection involved leveraging technology resources such as chatting functions on the Wattpad site. Often, these kinds of friendships were marked by acknowledging friends on your personal profile and racing to be the first to comment on a friend’s newly-published story, thereby making the affiliation public. ‘Friending’ on the site comprised a complex choreography of appropriate talk, behavior, and use of symbols and technology – in short, a discourse.

Self- and Other-ascribed Identities

Although identities are never completely fixed or given, it matters whether persons feel that their identity was defined by themselves in a given context or imposed by someone with more power. For example, researchers show differences in children’s practices and identities in play that is guided by the children themselves and play that is structured by adults. Yuen & Shaw (2003) argue that in the context of child-structured play, children in their study were able to feel more agency and experience more leeway in the expression of social roles.

In laying out different perspectives on identity as an analytic lens in education research, Gee (2003) posits a tension between identities that are ascribed to people and those that people choose to take up and assert. This tension is spelled out in Gee’s differentiation between the institutional identity perspective and the affinity identity perspective. Institutional identities are imparted onto people by institutions; for instance, the school may tell you that you are a teacher or a student while underwriting underlying norms with performing this identity. In direct contrast to this perspective, Gee puts forth the affinity identity perspective in which people may take up identity stances based on common interests, hobbies, or objects of affection. So, to take his example, ‘Trekkers’ or Star Trek fans establish their own identity as a fan because of a common affinity for the franchise of Star Trek. The tension between these perspectives is manifest in the fact that institutional identities seem to be formed and sustained by the institution at hand while affinity identities are in a way self-ascribed.

Somers (1994) argues that it is through narratives that we constitute our social identities, as we come to be who we are by being located or locating ourselves in social narratives rarely of our own making. Drawing on these ideas, this article considers the way that youth negotiate narratives of identity not of their own making and the way that youth construct their own narratives of the self within overlapping networks of adult and peer group relations – in ways which might in turn recast available narratives of identity.

The Work of Identities and Boundaries

Because of this emphasis on identity as an interactional, discursive process, many theorists have taken up the phrase ‘identity work’ to describe activities connected to constructing, aligning, and contrasting your self with others. The process of forming identities is connected to establishing boundaries between groups, contexts, and people: the simultaneous marking of who you are and who you are not. As stated above, language and literacy become major players in establishing and maintaining identity-related boundaries. Wattpaders used specialized language and ways of writing, talking, and relating to mark their identities in opposition to other possible identities within the fan community. The work of their identity depended on ‘boundary work’ or the making and remaking of boundaries between realms of practice (school vs. non-school) and membership of groups (true fan vs. layperson; insider vs. outsider). As participants described their literacy practices in the fandom and what these practices mean to them, their descriptions and choices of words created and reified differences between different categories.
Thus, in order to understand how the participants are valorizing and making sense of their literate practices and identities, it was important to stay attuned to talk about borders between groups and practices. Discourse theory and studies are specifically well suited to analyzing language practices within a community to see how these practices ‘build’ (Gee, 2004) particular identities, connections, and disjunctures. A focus on boundary work within the fan site allows us to closely inspect discursive work with which members maintain boundaries between different realms of practice.

Research Questions

By probing narratives of engagement, as represented by the fans in the study, this study seeks to understand what the participants themselves find salient and important about the practices they engage in. The research questions addressed in this article are:

1. How did study participants mark, negotiate and narrate their identities vis-à-vis their literate engagement on Wattpad and in school?
2. What kinds of linguistic and literate resources did they draw upon in the process of identity management?
3. What can fans’ narratives tell us about their perceptions of connections and disconnects between creative activities around popular culture and in school?

Methodology

Study Context

Wattpad, a free online writing community, describes itself as the ‘world’s largest community for discovering and sharing stories’ (Wattpad, 2013). Boasting a monthly audience of over 10 million readers, it claims to connect over 10,000 readers to stories each minute. Content is user generated, allowing all members to contribute to its library of articles, stories, and poems. Wattpad allows members to join smaller communities within the larger site, called ‘clubs,’ where ‘discussions’ are held. Most pertinent to this study are the clubs that are organized around genres of writing (e.g. horror, romance, etc.). ‘Fan Fiction’ is a club all to its own, and is comprised of over 30,300 members to date. The most popular (in terms of views, comments, and publication) fanfiction topic on this site is the boy band One Direction (1D), and as such, the focus of this study will be the fanfiction community on Wattpad. Presently, nine of the 15 most recent discussions in this club are by ‘Directioners,’ as One Direction fans affectionately refer to their fandom, and are topically related to the band or fanfiction about it. Forum postings, site profiles, and interviews with participants indicated that the site members of this fandom are mostly teenage girls, located in the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia.

As a website, an e-book reading app, and an online community, Wattpad draws in a large young adult population, most of whom use mobile devices like phones and tablets to compose, share, read, and provide feedback on stories. User statistics suggest that 80% of users are under the age of 25 and most of them are female.

In addition to being a place for composing, consuming, and circulating stories and attendant images (book covers and trailers to advertise the new books), Wattpad provides built-in mechanisms for regulating reputation, representation, and community on the site. Users create profiles on which they use pictures, quotes, and links to mark their identities and affiliations. Profiles are also used as sites where you can ‘follow’ and ‘fan’ specific users (and to gauge the size of their following), send them personal messages, and sign up for a feed that notifies you of their posting activity. Popularity and reputation play a role in how users market themselves, formulate their paragraphs, and communicate with fellow users – some authors sent out thousands of messages and ‘tweets’ in an attempt to get more ‘reads’ and commentary. The most frequently accessed stories appear on the ‘Hot List’ on the main page, some of which have been downloaded millions of times. For some participants, the Hot List was an entryway into finding out about fanfiction in general and boy band fanfiction in particular. In one of the participant biographies shared with me in an interview, this mode of discovery served as an impetus for the participant to
write and self-publish her first book and moreover the ability to conceptualize herself as a person ‘who writes’.

Thus, the formal and informal structures within Wattpad generated many 'texts' beyond the manuscripts of books and stories. These texts – such as the multimodal profiles, commentary, notes, and conversations on designated forums – in conjunction with the interviews, provided insight into curation and negotiation of identity on the site.

Participants

The focal data for this study are interviews conducted with 24 ‘Directioners’ (22 females; 2 males) who are members of the Fan Fiction Club. The participants in the interview sample included particularly high-ranking or ‘popular’ members as well as those that were new and did not yet enjoy a larger readership. Ages for these participants ranged from 13 to 21, and three-quarters of them were between the ages 13 and 18 and still living at home with their parents. Most attended either middle or high school. Although the participants almost entirely wrote stories in English, most came from highly diverse, multicultural and multilingual environments. For example, two interviewees grew up learning three languages at once – a native dialect, the country’s official language (e.g. Hindi), and English (the language of schooling).

Procedures

Investigation of the Directioner community on Wattpad took place over a nine-month period, during which the activities on the site were observed on a biweekly basis. In-depth interviews were conducted with 24 participants, the protocols for which were semi-structured and designed to elicit discussion pertinent to the research questions. Besides allowing for rich and descriptive narratives (Neuman, 2003), in accordance with the sociocultural theory in which this study is grounded, this approach permitted participants to convey how they interpret and make meaning of their own particular situations (Kvale, 1996).

Artifacts created by study participants were also analyzed, focusing on media objects such as the stories posted by participants, forum postings, story covers, and profiles of study participants. Such multifaceted inquiry into young people’s interest-powered practices allowed for data triangulation – using three kinds of data to corroborate and enrich the findings. Behavioral observations, interviews, and objects created by participants were studied across and alongside each other in order to look for differences and similarities.

To analyze the interviews, forum conversations, and literacy artifacts, this study utilized content and discourse analysis. In coding the data, iterative open-ended, thematic, and theory-driven coding techniques were used (Saldaña, 2009). This means that several ‘passes’ were taken at the data: the first pass to see what kind of recurring or divergent topics emerge, and the following passes were performed to trace themes identified in the data and in the literature. Mixed methods analytical software Dedoose was used to follow and derive overarching thematic categories that emerged with regularity across the different data sources.

Analysis

Literate Engagement in This Fan Space

The most common literacy practice in which the writers of One Direction fanfiction engage is the composing and remixing of cultural texts. Drawing from song lyrics, boy band members’ lives, other fandoms and previously written fanfiction stories, writers compose and publish texts. The genres of these texts vary widely, ranging from chapter books written in traditional prose, book covers created with digital imaging software, to trailers (i.e. short self-promotional videos) aimed at generating interest in longer fanfiction novels. The fanfiction stories themselves also represent diverse genres ranging from romance to biography to sci-fi. The plotlines of the fanfiction stories are informed by the readers’ comments and feedback.
As participants engaged in Wattpad’s focal activities, they also took on different roles and staked out attendant identities. For example, participants engaged in literate practices, such as writing stories or producing video montages, vis-à-vis umbrella identity categories, such as being a good fan, behaving appropriately as a ‘teenager’, or asserting oneself as a writer. In explaining what it meant to be involved in this particular discourse community, participants lean on bifurcated categories such as true fan (called ‘Directioner’) versus dilettante who might only know a song or two (called ‘Directionator’), teen versus adult, and ‘serious’ writer versus someone who is just fooling around. Understanding narratives of involvement meant delving into the boundaries between the different categories. These categories defined the contexts that gave shape to the participants’ understandings of their involvement.

Managing Boundaries between Types of Literate Engagement

Many members in the Directioner community on Wattpad specialized in a particular skillset, such as story-writing, commentary, or making illustrations. Each of these skillsets calls on intimate knowledge of specific discourses and technologies. In turn, members recruited this knowledge as part of laying claim to the identity associated with the work role. Importantly, work roles and the alliances and divisions among these roles were chosen by the individual member rather than outwardly imposed. Consequently, although the boundaries of work roles were constantly made and remade on the site, in interviews, role negotiation was attached to discourses of volition, expertise, and creativity. Participants linked the ability to choose specific areas of expertise and to figure out who really is an expert to the ability to define their own identities in the fan space.

Specializing in a work role meant participating in specific discourses. Interviewees specializing in writing and commentary spoke of the importance of picking the right plot for the stories and choosing the right words for giving feedback to others. Interviewees that made book covers focused on selecting pictures that have the right ‘feel’ to fit the story at hand. Graphic designers advertised their services on the forums, positioning themselves as experts and offering help to others trying to develop Photoshop or iMovie skills. Often, fans with different work roles collaborated on projects. Ayush, 19, describes how his project was bolstered by the collaboration of others:

I wrote an original story and posted it. Some people read it and liked it. So I asked one of them, who was good at drawing, to draw it for me. He made me a book cover ... in the book cover club or something. I was thankful someone made me a book cover because I wouldn’t have made one for myself. I don’t know how to. I feel like I got a lot of reads because of that.

In Ayush’s case, the ultimate endeavor entailed the production of at least three individuals, who each worked on a separate component of the end result. Being able to specialize in one aspect of the final project allowed him to capitalize on his own interests and aptitudes. Ayush saw himself as a content expert: he had fan-specific knowledge and could weave those together with sci-fi and anime genres. Collaborating with others on a book project for an authentic audience allowed the project members to tap into personal motivations and skills. For this group of young people, Wattpad presents self-directed and interest-based opportunities to produce and publish their work in a context focused on the project itself. This capability can be contrasted with Ayush’s experience with formal classrooms in which the project was simply a vehicle for a skill to be practiced.

Specialization allows participants to hone in on and market a skill as an instance of a positive identity. As in other studies of identity development in affinity spaces and fandoms (Lam, 2000; Black, 2008), this interest-driven space enables participants to take identity stances of authority, expertise, and legitimacy, which are often at odds with identity stances they are able to take within the classroom walls.

Managing Boundaries between Types of Fan Engagement

In describing membership and attributing status in the community, members routinely distinguish ‘true’ fans from others, with context-dependent rules and customs that govern this separation. During interviews and in discussions in the club’s forums, participants discussed their identification...
Contrasting Visions

as teenagers, women, and, commonly, ‘fangirls’. In interviews, almost all of the participants defined their fan identity in alignment or opposition to the category fangirl. Some embraced the term, using it as an important positive aspect of their self-identity. Others described themselves as specifically not fangirls, while some members used ‘fangirling’ as an inoffensive verb. This word functioned as an umbrella term for the kinds of activities and acts that index cultural membership of the One Direction fandom. Activities associated with ‘fangirling’ included writing and reading about the band, cataloguing the band members’ tweets and retweets, scrolling through pictures of the members, feeling your heart stop when a 1D song came on the radio, and transposing a song into another language.

According to the participants, a ‘fangirl’ is someone who understands herself to be a particularly enthusiastic fan of something. Similar to the difference between a person who skateboards and ‘a skater’ (Buckingham, 2009), a fangirl is more than just a girl who likes One Direction; it is a girl who understands herself in relation to the band and fan base of One Direction. Interestingly, not all fans of the band or participants in the fan club were female, but the terms ‘fangirl’ and talk about fangirling did important discursive work in constructing identities, values, and distinctions in this community. Fangirling at once carried the connotation of the most intense and in-depth engagement with the band and a kind of crazed and hormonal state of the fan. As a turn of phrase, in talk on the website and in interviews, ‘fangirl’ could serve as recognition of the potency of one’s engagement but also as a dismissal of this type of engagement based on attached stereotypes.

Members’ definitions of fangirling were context-dependent and did the discursive work of connecting fan status to a specific, often more involved, genre of participation within the fandom. For instance, Nicole, 15, who does not consider herself a Directioner defines ‘fangirling’ behaviorally: ‘Fangirling is like going crazy, blushing and jumping around on the mention of One Direction’. But Maya, a self-described Directioner, interprets the practices differently, locating the meaning of fangirling in a set of relationships between the fans and the band:

Liking a band happens when you think their music is good …. Being a Directioner gives it a whole new meaning. It connects us more to those boys. We know a lot about them, and we are inspired by them. And we would support them through thick and thin. That’s what being a Directioner is all about.

Understanding the differences between being an outsider, a fan, and a fangirl color and inform the way authors engage in literate practices on the site. Abigail, a 14-year-old girl from Canada, who specializes in sci-fi-inspired 1D fanfiction, would describe herself ‘more as a FAN than a fanGIRL’. In part, this is because her interests on Wattpad are quite literary and serious. She enjoys some 1D songs and fanfiction stories but would never ‘jump up and down’ if their song came on randomly – which is the kind of emotional discourse and practice she defines as characteristic of fangirling. Abigail is also wary of being called names or perceived as immature by her peers or family members so she rarely admits being a fan to them. She talks about fangirling in interchangeably light-hearted and critical tones, but explains that she is glad that there exists a safe haven for that sort of thing.

Abigail strategically manages the perceived (and outwardly imposed) stigma of the fandom when she shares her work with her mother. Prior to printing the story for sharing and feedback, Abigail goes in and replaces names and references to celebrity culture with pseudonyms. After getting feedback on the story, she changes the names back in preparation for publishing on Wattpad. In this strategic handling of her texts, Abigail capitalizes on her positive identity as a hobbyist writer with her mother, while avoiding the pitfalls of the stereotype-laden ‘fangirl’ identity. She then translates the text back to the fansite, building up her identity there as an expert fan and writer. In controlling the way she is recognized by others in different contexts (the family vs. the fandom), Abigail calls upon her knowledge of what is appropriate to manage her identity in those contexts.

The identity categories of ‘fan’ and ‘fangirl’ consequently were negotiated and instantiated with specific practices. In line with Gee’s concept of ‘identity kits’, real fans were recognized by the ways they utilized words, texts, emotions, and language. To be seen as a true fan or a Directioner, a participant had to leverage knowledge about the band, song lyrics, and boy band fanfiction genre conventions. ‘Fangirls’ relied on the language of emotion in rendering their world opaque to
outsiders. Claiming an identity as a particular kind of fan meant being engaged in a particular genre of practice and being literate in particular discourses. In Abigail’s narrative, the manipulation of text lead her to leverage different aspects of ‘who she was’ in different situations. With her mother, she used story-writing to play up the ‘writerly’ practices of her Wattpad involvement, while back on the website she could use the same text to emphasize her fan knowledge and affinity. In developing nuanced fan identities, members indexed different parts of themselves in different contexts and performed strategic boundary work in how they wanted to be recognized by others.

Managing Boundaries between Teen and Adult-authored Spaces

Another realm of making and remaking boundaries within the space was related to age. In the interviews, the Directioner community on Wattpad was often presented as an autonomous teen space. Although participants sometimes consulted with adults in forums or even discussed the site with their parents, the band fanfiction pages were implicitly understood as an adult-free zone. Interviewees expressed that being involved in a teen-only space was one of the pleasures they got from participation. Like gender, age became layered into the participants’ definition of what it meant to be a good fan. In fact, participants highlighted ‘fangirling’ as a teen girl phase that all women go through. The fan community was touted in opposition of the adult-ordered ‘real life’ worlds of the participants, like their homes, afterschool clubs, and schools.

Participants narrated both the content of the boy band fandom world and the practices connected to the ‘fangirling’ and fanfiction hobby as inaccessible to adults for the most part. Some highlight the positive aspects of carving out a space for themselves on the internet and the inability of adults to truly ‘get’ their passion. One informant specifically lauded Tumblr, one social networking site used for fan-related activity, for having a logic to it that is harder to crack for adults and thus less likely to be invaded by adults, unlike Facebook. Other participants wished they could share the kind of recognition and expertise they enjoy on the site with the adults in their life but could not due to the stigmatized ‘fangirl’ identity. The fear of being thought of as ‘crazy’ and being misunderstood came up several times with the interviewees, especially with authors that wrote stories that have overtly romantic and sexual themes. To pre-empt being seen in the light of this stigma, members carefully managed their identities and built up strategic separators between the adult world, where the outwardly imposed stigma of being a fan seemed to reign, and the teen/fan world, where the meanings attached to being a fan could be negotiated by the fans themselves.

To illustrate, for Katie, 14, the main affordance of participation in this fan space is affiliating with like-minded peers, so the intervention of adults and adult content world was not welcome. Here is her take on 1D fanfiction writing and the value of it in school terms:

Katie: I mean the school don’t encourage it. Not that they really know that 80% of the girls in our grade have Wattpad.
Interviewer: Haha, so you don’t even tell your teachers you write for fun?
Katie: No. It’s like a private thing between students and friends.
Interviewer: Why do you think that is?
Katie: Well probably because what we write about [1D] we don’t really want the teachers to know
Interviewer: Because they wouldn’t ‘get’ it or something else?
Katie: They definitely wouldn’t.
Katie: Wouldn’t get it plus they would ask questions.

Katie conceived of Wattpad as a private world, the logic of which would escape her parents and teachers. Her differentiation between adult-sanctioned and ‘fan’ reading and writing practices sketch out another kind of boundary work noticed within interviews.

Managing Boundaries between Schooled and Fan Literacies

Most participants did not see their literate activities on these sites as directly consequential to their schooled literacies (Street, 2003), and the few that did had difficulty articulating connections because school and pop culture were viewed as domains that do not mix. In the same way that
members discursively constructed separations between their work roles, fan identities, and teen and adult realms, they also positioned their fan involvement as outside of and sometimes, in opposition to, their involvement in school. In some cases, language was used explicitly to differentiate between schooled and fan literacies. For instance, Katie distinguishes fanfiction writing from ‘writing’ writing – the kind you would do for school. In her conceptualization, school writing is something you do within a structured environment, with a given prompt, and an adult-led process and evaluation. For Katie, writing about One Direction and sharing stories on fan sites carries a different set of meanings; it is about passion, inspiration, and free-form expression.

This way of thinking complicates two popular narratives about youth hanging out online: that it’s a waste of time or that it can be brought into the classroom with little modification. Although the skills Katie acquires as she ‘fangirls out’ on Wattpad informed all of her reading and writing, she strategically kept the content world separate from her school identity and interactions with adults. At play here were the reputation of the interest and the domain it belongs to. Her fan fiction writing and book cover designing lived in the domain of interest and self-determination, not in domains of adult mediation and institutionally sanctioned learning.

Several of the interviewees connect the activity of writing to what is done in school but not the topic of their writing. Consider this example differentiating writing within the context of the fandom with what their parents or teachers might value:

*Interviewer: But your [1D fanfiction] writing; have they ever read it?*
*Sandra: Nooooo omg. That’d be weird if they read fan fiction.*
*Interviewer: Why?*
*Sandra: Because it’s my parents. They’re so strict and if they ever read my fan fiction or any others, I’d probably be freaked out.*
*Interviewer: So they wouldn’t understand?*
*Sandra: Yes, exactly.*
*Interviewer: So they know you write, they just don’t know what about?*
*Sandra: No but they still support my writing.*
*Interviewer: Even though they don’t know the real reason that you write?*
*Sandra: Hahahah yeah.*
*Interviewer: What would they think if you tried to explain?*
*Sandra: They’d probably think I’m crazy or something.*

In laying down boundaries between fan and school content worlds, participants explained that fanfiction belongs in the fan sphere of identity-making and not in the adult-ordered institutional sphere. For both Sandra and Katie, school writing was something you do when you are provided a stimulus that is school-sanctioned and teacher-approved. Students’ descriptions bring to mind Lankshear and Knobel’s (2006) ‘book space’ descriptions of top-down, expert-centric authority; school writing is disciplined and regimented. Similarly, Ayush described school as the place where he was forced to speak English and learn standard content, not engage in languages and practices related to his home and interests. Fandom then became a space where he could use everyday language and expletives. In contrast to that in school, his creative writing took place in his home tongue, Malayam, and later had to do with his passions like manga and fanfiction. He specifically shields those activities by drawing a boundary between fan spaces and institutional spaces as they seem sacred and personal.

The semantic category of ‘writing’ itself took on different meanings for participants depending on the context. Participants described the boundaries they were drawing between official writing practices (the kind you would see in schools) and the fooling around with words that took place on fan sites:

*School [writing is] set in a certain format (essay = five paragraphs, intro, then three explaining then a conclusion). But on the internet, it’s easy to be myself and I can make a paragraph one sentence if I wanted, no one is going to stop me. Yes [school writing is] very different. On the internet, I write about some lighter things and some darker than I would dare to in school.*
(Nicole, 15)

Again, study participants highlighted a sense of agency that animated their pursuits within the fandom in contrast to schooled spaces. Although participants acknowledged ‘writing’ as something
that happens both in school and in fan sites, their very language within the interviews creates and maintains boundaries between the two kinds of writing practices. Once again, one technique of separation is one of discursive framing. Members expressed being able to position themselves within the fandom vis-à-vis different work roles and fan identities. In contradistinction, the world of school was framed in terms of obligation and hierarchical authority. In school spaces, participants were positioned, by someone else (e.g. a teacher) into certain work roles and identities.

Mediation between Fan and School Spaces

Although participants described the spaces of school and fan content as disconnected, they saw the activity of writing as a mediator between the two worlds. For Katie, possible mediation occurs at the level of basic transfer: although the content world of *One Direction* firmly belongs in an autonomous, teen-only space, the grammar, vocabulary, and writing efficacy she gains within the fan space seep into her schooling and inform her classroom literacy practices:

> [Fanfiction writing] is good for my creativity and imagination. Good for my vocabulary. It’s good to be able to pick up on my mistakes and it helps in essays and assignments. It gets my mind thinking. In ways, it has helped with school activities. It helps in English or drama because I can easily think up funky ways to make it better and stuff. Yes, I like to think of what I did in stories to make them better and then think what I can do to this to make it better.

This reflection demonstrates that even though earlier Katie states there is no connection between school and fanfiction writing, there were indirect links between the two, including content area (e.g. vocabulary), skills (e.g. spotting mistakes), and motivation.

For Ayush, the bridge was an affective one. The sense of self-efficacy he gains from participating on Wattpad has purchase in his schooling endeavors, especially in terms of language-learning. Growing up, Malayam was the language of home, comfort, and fun, while English was the language of discipline. His interest in anime and fanfic rendered the boundary between the two languages more porous. English grew legs as a language of comfort and fun, as well. A mediator between fan-literate practices and his school-literate practices was his disposition toward language itself.

And finally, during the course of my interview with Manjit, 17, he began to connect the dots between his fan and school literacies with a gradated conception of what it means to be a serious writer.

> Well, I won’t say that I’m a writer. I’m basically interested in comedy/humor. So I write these silly stories that most people find funny. When I think of a writer, I imagine a serious guy or girl sitting on the desk, typing on a typewriter and drinking coffee to stay awake through the night ... But in a way, I might qualify as one.

In this quote, Manjit considers what it means for someone to be labeled as a legitimate writer, showcasing ways in which the category of ‘writing’, as a literate practice, is bound to particular behavior and affect. ’Real’ writing began as a serious endeavor that does not take place in casual spaces. In effect, his humorous and playful composition practices – Manjit writes ‘ironic’ fanfiction – did not count as ‘real’ writing. He started the interview with the categorical statement of ‘I won’t say that I’m a writer’, but reconsidered this statement upon reflection of the actual practices involved in fanfiction. This exchange showed the possibility of ‘brokering’ bridges between teen fan worlds and schooled experiences. Participants in the Directioner fandom valued the ability to have a choice in how they conceptualize their everyday literate experiences and whether they translate them into the academic sphere.

Discussion

As study participants frame their participation in the fandom in relation to other genres of practice, they also create and maintain boundaries between these realms. In explaining what it meant to be involved in this particular discourse community, participants leaned on bifurcated identity categories such as true fans versus dabblers, teen versus adult spaces, and ‘serious’ writers versus those fooling around with words. These categories gave shape to the participants’ understandings...
of their involvement. For instance, being and being recognized as a true fan or fangirl carried with it the liability of knowing specific facts about the band, writing in an emotional cadence, and leveraging certain symbols and texts.

Notions about what counts as valued practice and literate identity in dominant discourse came through strongly in participants’ characterization of ‘fangirling’ and ‘good writing’. In connection to both of those constructs, participants often pointed to a more unified, other-imposed meaning to practices connected to being a fan and writer ‘in the real world’ and a more nuanced, community-imposed meaning to the practice ‘in the fan world’.

In discussions of fangirling, participants spoke of emotionality that deemed fangirling as a practice as crazy in society’s eyes but enabled valuable performances in terms of the fandom. The model of an obsessed, hormonal, and often female fan is not new. There is a long tradition of rendering fandom as pathology and capitalizing on the ‘fanatic’ potential of the term’s origin, implicated in accounts of fandoms as far-ranging as Star Trek fans, Beatlemania, and Franz Liszt’s classic music performances in the 1800s (Russell, 2013). Fans are often stereotyped as excessive and obsessive. In his work on fan creative production, Jenkins (1992) notes that this ‘stereotypical conception of the fan, while not without a limited factual basis, amounts to a projection of anxieties about the violation of dominant cultural hierarchies’, elucidating the category of fans in terms of modes of behavior and established tastes and classes (p. 17).

This idea of a stigmatized teen girl fandom was echoed throughout the study, as participants spoke about fangirling as a set of practices that can be easily dismissed, or even laughed at, by parents and teachers. Because of this other-imposed cultural model of the crazed and hormonal teenage fan, Abigail – as outlined above – strategically replaces all names and markers of fandom from her stories before sharing them with her mother.

Tellingly, as Gray (2003) points out, ‘there has frequently been a gendered element to the pathologication [of the fan]. Behavior perceived as fundamentally irrational, excessively emotional, foolish and passive has made the fan decisively female’ (as cited in Gray, 2003). These stigmatized narratives of fandom as too emotional, low culture, and perhaps even feminized are some reasons why fan-related practices are seen as fundamentally distinct from formal schooling practices. Although fangirls in this study gained expertise in print and media literacies and regularly produced texts, the impetus of this production was not seen as legitimate and valuable in adult-ordered and institutional spaces. Through received ideas about fandom and fans’ own desire for differentiation, fan literacy practices were delegated to a different genre of practice, disconnected but sometimes connectable to the academic genre.

Essentialized notions of fandom, often seeking to police fan engagement, come not only from the dominant cultural actors, but also from within the fan community. Yet, the supposition that the 1D fangirl is somehow crazed was not ‘internalized’ by fan site participants in a clear cut way. In fact, members – whether or not they saw themselves as fangirls – took up, modified, and negotiated this stereotype. One fan that saw herself as a ‘serious’ writer distanced herself from the label ‘fangirl’ but also utilized fan discourse and memes in order to make her stories more appealing to fans on the site. Others spoke about tapping into fan-related effect (e.g. the feeling you get when you hear your favorite song) as inspiration for composition and using Wattpad as a platform to redefine fandom as something positive, like a ‘family’ although the adults might not understand this, according to Sandra. Paradoxically, fan writing although having low academic value in the view of participants seemed to enjoy high literary and cultural value. Again, the meanings of certain practices and even terms gained nuance, legitimacy, and new definitions when the fans saw themselves as in charge of meaning-making processes.

Negotiations that took place around the identity of ‘fan’ and the meaning of ‘writing’ underscore how having a sense of ownership over one’s identity and literate practices proved to be an important part of participating in this space. Such negotiations were also quite salient as participants explained the value of their fan practices and often contrasted the context of those practices to those of school.

Links between fan and school spaces, often articulated by participants themselves, took different shapes, depending on the context of the conversation or the interpretive frame taken by the interviewee (Goffman, 1989). Participants opted to construct schooled and fan spaces as completely separate when discussing potential stigma. Yet, in reflection of growing faculty, some noticed significant skill transfer. Perhaps summarizing the argument of this article, Ayush spelled
out the way his participation in the 1D fandom was positively informing his disposition towards text and language-learning as a whole (akin to other studies of fandom, like Carrington, 2005; Black, 2008; Coiro & Castek, 2010). Through establishing expertise and having fun with literacy on the website, he was repurposing his English and expanding his understanding of what language was ‘for’. These stories illustrate why it is important for designers of learning spaces to understand the literate experiences, identities, and values that young people themselves attach to their out-of-school practices and to attend to the importance of the sense of agency that differently-ordered spaces may afford.

**Conclusion**

The fan context does not represent a place where power, hierarchy, and standing were unimportant. In fact, the 1D Wattpad context was rife with displays of power, plays for recognition, and struggles to be seen as a real fan. However, the presence of status-related boundary markers on the site did not make it a place of top-down hierarchy, in the view of participants. This was to an extent because the participants saw themselves as sharing a fandom, an age group, an interest in print and media expression, and a language – an insider discourse that helped them recognize and be recognized as part of the in group. Also, and perhaps more importantly, the fan participants saw themselves as agents in the boundary-making, staking, and negotiating practices on the site. This process of figuring out whether one has ownership of her discourse and identity related practices lay at the heart of the distinction youth saw between fan- and school-related contexts.

Although it may seem ironic that young people may not connect richly literate media and text-heavy fan contexts to academics, their narratives of available roles, practices, and identities in different contexts help us clarify this distinction. On the one hand, this fandom is filled with young people developing literacy practices, literate identities, and relationships to print, visual, and musical texts. Through fandom, they develop voice, learn writing and editing skills and fortify positive attitudes toward print and media literacies. On the other hand, participants often saw their skills and practices within the fandom as unrelated and unrelatable to the world of school. They often did build bridges between the fan and school worlds, pointing out that their vocabulary increased or that the quality of their essays got better. Still, they saw their pop culture pursuits as essentially different from school, visualizing boy band fanfiction as a fan-only or teen-only kind of realm. As we know, multiple strands of literacy research show that children’s writing development benefit from a permeable curriculum that allows popular culture to seep into the classroom. However, this study raises questions about ways in which educators can link popular culture pursuits and institutional realms without infringing upon youth-ordered cultural spaces that afford a sense of agency and community.

**References**


http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0898-5898(00)00032-2
Contrasting Visions


Ksenia A. Korobkova & Rebecca W. Black


KSENIA A. KOROBOKOVA is a doctoral student at the University of California at Irvine, specializing in literacy, language, and technology. Her research interests include informal learning environments, new media, literacies and popular culture. Correspondence: ksenia.k@uci.edu

REBECCA W. BLACK is an Associate Professor of Language, Literacy, and Technology in the Department of Education at the University of California, Irvine. She received her PhD in Curriculum and Instruction from the University of Wisconsin, Madison. Her research centers on the literacy and socialization practices of young people from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds who are writing and participating in online, popular culture-inspired environments.