Chapter 5

Digital Resources: English Language Learners and Reader Reviews in Online Fanfiction

In this chapter, I take a closer look at the sort of feedback one adolescent ELL author receives on fanfiction.net, and her responses to this feedback, as a means of understanding how readers and this author co-design the writing and reading space through their interactions. In addition, analysis will explore how one focal participant has learned to effectively design the affinity space, networks, and her identity in ways that are responsive to her needs as an English learning writer.

The afternoon’s sun was still shining bright in the clear blue sky. The clouds were dancing in circles as the wind blew gently at them. Sighed Sakura dreamily as she looked up at the clear sky and felt her heart filled with happiness. This was how her new life should’ve been, filled with joy. Everything looked wonderful and fantastic to Sakura. The flowers smelled lovely. The trees waved their branches as if they were welcoming Sakura’s presence. The grasses beside the sidewalk were lush and green. Even the fresh air tasted a little sweet. Sakura was in such good mood and she didn’t even care if the people were staring at her oddly. Her heart danced in joy as she continued to walk. She never actually noticed the beauty of Tokyo until now. (Tananka, Nanako, 12/1/2002)

Introduction:
In recent years, new media and information and communication technologies (ICTs) have made it possible for youth to engage with popular culture across diverse terrains in their daily lives. Online fanfiction sites are spaces where school-age fans are using new ICTs to engage, not only with pop culture and media, but also with a broad array of literate activities that are aligned with many school-based literacy practices. Additionally, through such activities, fans are able to draw from a range of cultural and linguistic resources to develop identities as knowledgeable participants and to accrue unofficial forms of cultural capital in such spaces. Fanfiction, as the name suggests, denotes texts written by fans about their favorite media and pop cultural icons. Such texts often extend the plotline of the original series (e.g. characters from Star Trek discover a new planet), explore relationships between characters (e.g. Shaggy and Velma from Scooby Doo fall in love), and/or expand the timeline of the media by developing prequels and/or sequels of sorts (e.g. a journal detailing the many regrets of Darth Vader before his death); however, these are just a few examples of the many creative contributions such fan texts make to the pop cultural imaginary.

My previous work has explored many of the literacy and social practices taking place in one of the largest online fanfiction archives, fanfiction.net, illustrating how through composing texts, creating fan sites, and interacting on the site many English Language Learners (ELLs) are able to develop social and intellectual cachet as successful writers and users of English (Black, 2005), and develop skills that are promoted through popular writing pedagogy (Black, in press a). In this article, I would like to take a closer look at the sort of feedback one adolescent ELL author receives on fanfiction.net, and her responses to this feedback, as a means of understanding how readers and this author co-
design the writing/reading space through their interactions. In addition, analysis will explore how the online fanfiction site affords both author and readers opportunity to display diverse kinds of expertise that are based both on school-based literacy practices as well as in-depth knowledge in the realm of popular culture.

Theory, Design, and the Fanfiction Context:

Scholarship within the New Literacy Studies (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Gee, 2004; New London Group, 1996) has dealt with shifts from what is valued within the Old Capitalist/Industrial “mindset” (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003) that centers on the production of material goods, to what is valued within social and work spaces rooted in a “mindset” “forged in cyberspace” (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003). Such shifts have come in tandem with the fast-paced development of new ICTs and a New Capitalist focus on the production and exchange of information rather than commodities (Castells, 1996; Gee, 2004). Jim Gee (2004) posits that facility with design has in large part replaced manufacturing skills within the value system of New Capitalism. According to Gee there are “three types of design that reap large rewards in the New Capitalism: the ability to design new identities, affinity spaces, and networks” (pg. 97). In this paper I use these three interrelated aspects of design as lenses through which to view the interactions and activities taking place on fanfiction.net.

Affinity Spaces
In his text *Situated Language and Learning: A Critique of Traditional Schooling*, Gee (2004) draws on the notion of design to shed light on some forms of pop-culture inspired learning and interaction through his exploration of a video game fan site. In this work, Gee distinguishes between the well known notion of “communities of practice” (Wenger, 1999) in which novices learn through apprenticeship and scaffolding in their interactions with experts (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and an alternative construct for looking at learning, that of *affinity spaces*. In affinity spaces, people interact and relate to each other around a common passion, proclivity, or endeavor. So for instance, as in Gee’s example, members of the affinity space relate to each other in terms of the video game *Age of Mythology*. While in my work, members of the online fanfiction site share a passion for the Japanese Animation (anime) series *Card Captor Sakura*. Gee posits that defining the point of affiliation in this way emphasizes how variables such as race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, and education level, while certainly not eliminated, are backgrounded to this common taste or endeavor. Thus, affinity spaces are unique in that they provide opportunity for individuals who may not share the bonds typically associated with community to gather across on and/or offline common ground. Moreover, on such common ground, the expertise of a thirteen year old ELL raised playing video games or watching anime often trumps that of the adults or even the university professors participating these sites. Additionally, as will be discussed in the following sections, in contrast to communities of practice, within affinity spaces there is a wide range of expertise and forms of knowledge that are valued. Thus, the roles of “expert” and “novice” are highly variable and contingent on activity and context.
Designing networks is another key aspect of design in the New Capitalism (Kelly cited in Gee, 2004) and our information-oriented society (Castells, 1996). As a research context, fanfiction.net provides clear examples of how youth are learning to use new ICTs to develop “communicational links between people and organizations” as well as between “people and various sorts of tools and technologies” (Gee, 2004, p. 99) in ways that traverse temporal, spatial, and linguistic boundaries. For example, in examining interactions between writers and readers on the site, it is clear that participants must be able to navigate “the multiple linguistic, audio, and symbolic visual graphics of hypertext” (Luke, 2000, p. 73) in order to successfully participate in the social network of this online affinity space. The site and its members use an array of text and symbol-based signs to indicate hyperlinked connections both within fanfiction.net, and across other pertinent sites, such as the fanfiction glossary of terms, fanfiction writing help sites, members’ personal web pages, and official corporate sites that provide information on copyright laws for the various media texts that fans are drawing from, to name just a few. Such connections allow members to draw from knowledge that is distributed across different locations. This distribution of resources is also a defining feature of networked affinity spaces (Gee, 2004).

In terms of the design-related skills of leveraging new technologies and learning to communicate within global networks, it is also clear that fans “draw on a range of knowledge about traditional and newly blended genres or representational conventions, cultural and symbolic codes, as well as linguistically coded and software-driven
meanings” (Luke, 2000, p. 73). For example, although the fictions are written primarily in English and often represent scenarios from the lives of adolescents living in North America, writers and readers alike incorporate Japanese and Chinese language and cultural symbols into their fictions, thus creating linguistically and culturally hybrid texts (Black, 2005). In addition, fanfictions are often hybrid textual forms comprised of combinations of various media and narrative genres, such as a songfiction that combines a narrative storyline using anime characters and the lyrics of a popular song, or a crossover moviefiction that combines the characters of an anime series with the setting or narrative elements of a well known movie. Consequently, readers must understand such hybridity in order to successfully participate and give feedback in the space. In addition, fans are also able to provide links to personal web pages where they create fan texts that incorporate various modes of representation such as audio, images, and sound, thus allowing ELLs (and others) to draw on skills with graphic arts and publishing software to display non-linguistic forms of expertise. Having multiple means of attaining status and displaying expertise is also another defining feature of affinity spaces (Gee, 2004).

Identity and Discourse

The notion of identity is crucial, not only to design, but to participation in schools as well as in fandoms. By identity, I mean the ability to be recognized as a “kind of person,” such as an anime fan, within a given context. From this perspective, individuals have multiple identities that are connected, not to some fixed, internal state of being, but rather to more flexible patterns of participation in social events (Gee, 2001). Gee (2001)
posits that in institutions such as schools, certain identities are given power through a process of *authorization* by which authorities and policymakers are able to draw from various rules, laws, and traditions to “author” positions as well as to “author” the occupants of such positions in terms of the rights and obligations that accompany institutionalized social roles.

Such authorized or *ascribed* identities are clearly present in classrooms where teachers are vested with the role of expert, and students by virtue of tracking, IEPs, and sometimes general supposition, are assigned roles as certain kinds of learners. This sort of ascription of identity becomes problematic when students from non-mainstream backgrounds are expected to occupy roles based on deficit models of cultural and linguistic diversity and differences in learning styles. Moreover, such cultural and cognitive-deficit models connote certain types of identities, behaviors, and abilities, without ample consideration of the role that the classroom and curricular contexts play in our assessments of student actions or in our rubrics for categorizing student identities.

Conversely, an interesting aspect of fanfiction sites and many other affinity spaces is the absence of imposed social roles or obligatory knowledge for participants. Thus, fanfiction.net is a learning environment where new ICTs and the absence of authorized roles for experts and novices afford individuals greater freedom in designing or discursively constructing what Gee calls *achieved* rather than ascribed identities.

According to Gee (2001), in the New Capitalist or “modern” value system of the information age, discourse and dialogue play an important role both in designing identities and in having others recognize such achieved identities within affinity spaces and online environments. Fanfiction.net is a clear example of a site where traditional
print-based language, as well as post-typographic forms of text, play crucial roles in defining the affinity space, creating and sustaining social networks, and enacting achieved identities within the site. Gee’s (1999) big-D discourse theory and method of analysis differentiates between little-d discourse, which is language in use, and big-D Discourse, which is the compilation of semiotic, material, and expressive resources individuals use to “pull off” certain socially-situated identities. Thus, d/D is an apt analytical construct for exploring how an adolescent ELL fanfiction writer uses her mastery of design to discursively construct and sustain an achieved identity as a highly popular author in this space, rather than taking on an ascribed identity as an ELL that struggles with writing in English. Such an approach also facilitates understand of how this author and her readers, through interaction and negotiation, are able to co-design a social and learning-based space where native and non-native English speakers alike are able to display expertise and build on their different forms of personal, cultural, and linguistic capital.

Methods

In order to contextualize my exploration of the literacy and social practices of fanfiction.net, I used traditional ethnographic methods such as collecting field notes, artifacts, and conducting interviews over two years of participant observation located in the site itself. The artifacts used as data for this paper come from a case study of a sixteen year old native Mandarin Chinese speaker, Tanaka Nanako*, who had only been learning English for two and a half years when she first began posting anime-based stories on
fanfiction.net. Nanako is an exceptional case in that she has become an expert in
design—more specifically, over time she has become very adept at networking in this
space and has developed a considerable group of readers and avid followers to the extent
that she now has over 6000 reviews of her 50 plus publicly-posted fanfiction texts. This
paper focuses on reader feedback for Nanako’s fourteen-chapter fanfiction titled *Love
Letters* which has received 1694 reviews (as of 5/21/2005).

Data Analysis

Due to the relatively unexplored nature of interaction in this space, analysis of the
data required several different layers of coding and interpretation that are grounded in
discourse analytic techniques. Initially, through multiple readings of Nanako’s *Love
Letters* and 1694 reader reviews, the texts were coded in an inductive fashion—
specifically, through these readings I focused on coding for various themes appearing in
the chapters and the reviews. In the next stage, I coded 200 reviews by breaking them
down into *lines* which are simple sentences or clauses that, much like “idea units” (Gee,
1986), are counted as separate lines only when the unit introduces new information. The
lines were then grouped into topical segments that are similar to what Gee (1996) refers
to as *stanzas* or “sets of lines about single minimal topic, organized rhythmically and
syntactically so as to hang together in a particularly tight way” (p. 94). In the next stage,
the data (divided into lines and segments) were compared across reviews in order to
identify recurring thematic and structural patterns in reader feedback. Such patterns of
interaction then were coded as categories, such as greetings, suggestions for
improvement, comparisons to own writing, and listed in a typology of information exchange.

For the purposes of this paper, I chose texts that were representative of salient types of reader reviews. I also focused on reviews that Nanako explicitly responds to in her Author’s Notes, in her fictions, and in a Thank You List for Reviewers that she updates for each chapter in order to gain a greater sense of the negotiation between writer and readers. After revisiting the initial thematic patterns from the typology, I then conducted a closer discourse analytic examination of such texts with the following questions in mind:

- What sort of linguistic “work” are Nanako’s texts and the reader reviews doing?
- How and in what ways are these texts representative of successful design in terms of affinity spaces, networks, and identity?
- How and in what ways might Nanako’s texts and reader feedback be indexing the author’s identity as a successful writer and the readers’ identities as knowledgeable participants, thus helping them all accrue forms of social and intellectual capital in this space?

In answering these questions, I coded data on multiple levels. First, I looked at separate lines in terms of form in order to identify the mood of each clause (e.g. indicative, imperative) and the main topic or thematic structure of each clause (Gee, 1999; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). Next, I returned and looked at each line in terms of the sort of socially-situated identities that were being either enacted, referenced, and/or were relevant to meaningful participation in the social network of this affinity space (Gee, 1999). I then turned back to Nanako’s texts to see her responses to each of these reviews.
This portion of the analysis includes explicit responses made through her communications with readers, as well as implicit responses made through revisions to her fanfiction stories. It seems important to emphasize, however, that the focus of this paper is not on minute discourse analysis of individual texts, but rather is aimed at identifying general “types” of reviews and patterns of interaction between Nanako and her readers in order to better understand the learning, social, and interactive aspects of this hitherto unexplored site.

Designing the Fanfiction Writing Space:

This section uses some of Nanako’s introductory and concluding Author’s Notes (A/Ns), or messages addressed directly to the audience, to illustrate her facility with design. Specifically, Nanako is quite skilled at using language and discourse to shape her own interactional and learning space in such a way that maximizes opportunities for constructive feedback on her language and writing. She also uses these notes as a means of establishing her social and writing-related resource network by cultivating strong relationships with readers. For instance, she begins and ends each of her chapters with Author’s Notes such as the following:

Opening Author’s Note

Segment A

Line 1  Important note: English is my second language

Line 2  and I only spoken it for 2.5 years.
Line 3  So please excuse my grammar and spelling mistakes.
Line 4  I might have some typos in the story,
Line 5  so hopefully you guys can look over them.

Segment B
Line 1  A/N: Konnichiwa minna-san!!
Line 2  I’m back! ^^
Line 3  Okie, I am trying my best to finish up this story,
Line 4  but I also have to have time to study for my exams. >_<;;;

Segment C
Line 1  Anyway, since I did good school,
Line 2  and remembered everything the teacher asked me to,
Line 3  I will be able to have more time for updating my crappy stories!

  ^____^;;;

Segment D
Line 4  Thank you all who reviewed this story,
Line 5  and this chapter is dedicated to Sakura Blossomz01, wild-gurl,

      Sweet^-^Rose, DZ pals, Fire Light and Lily-Chan.*

Line 6  Thank you for adding me to your favorite author list! ^//.//^
Line 7  THANKS FOR THE GREAT SUPPORT YOU ARE GIVING ME! ^________^
*Hugs her reviewers*

Segment E

By the way, please pay close attentions to the e-mails in this chapter, because they are some really important clues.

Segment F

MERRY CHRISTMAS EVERYONE!!

THIS ISH MY PRESENT FOR YOU!!

I HOPE YOU'LL LIKE IT!!! ^_______^ . (12/1/02)

And she also ends each chapter with Author’s Notes such as the following.

_Closing Author’s Note_

Segment A

A/N: ><;;; bad writing……..I’m not a good writer……..><;;;

please review, and tell me what you thinks of this story.

Because if you guys don’t like it,

I won’t write more……..

I always say that^^;;

Segment B
Nanako begins the chapter by identifying herself as an ELL in Line 1 and then, in lines 3-5, asking that readers overlook her typos and grammatical and spelling errors. In Segment E, she also directs the readers’ attention to certain aspects of the story, in this case the emails between characters. Such communication is a way for Nanako to play at least a small formative role in how readers approach the text and in what sort of feedback they provide. Also to this end, in the closing A/N she thanks readers for their support and clearly states “no flames!” in Line 7. According the the Fanfiction Glossary (2005) “to ‘flame’ someone is to viciously insult them or their work in a manner that has little or no redeeming value.” In this way, she is setting up a supportive writing environment for herself in which readers respond to the content or meaning-value of her fictions rather than discrete linguistic conventions. Additionally, in Lines 2 and 6 she solicits reader reviews and, through the conversational tone of the note, establishes a backdrop of dialogue and social as well as writing-related interaction.

Nanako’s skill at creating and sustaining social networks is also evidenced by the A/Ns. For instance, in Segment D, Line 6 she thanks readers for adding her to their “favorites list” which is a function of the site by which members can create hyperlinked lists of preferred stories and authors. Such links make it easier for members with shared interests to find each other and for like-minded readers to find Nanako’s fanfictions. She
also dedicates each chapter to reviewers who provide what she considers to be especially supportive or helpful feedback, as can be seen in Line 5. Another relatively unique aspect of Nanako’s A/Ns is the continuously updated *Thank You List* and a *Favorite Reviewers from the Last Chapter List* that she includes with each chapter. In the lists, she writes personal responses to certain reader reviews, thereby through acknowledgement giving explicit encouragement for the sort of feedback she finds helpful, and by omission implicitly discouraging feedback that she finds offensive or trivial. Furthermore, acknowledgement in the chapter dedications or the lists appears to be a status symbol among Nanako’s network of readers, and they openly discuss “making it” to the Thank You or Favorite Reviewer lists in their reviews.

Reader Reviews:

In looking at posted feedback, it is clear that readers take Nanako’s Author’s Notes and personal comments into consideration when reviewing. Moreover, close analysis reveals that readers’ appreciation for a story, their criteria for what counts as “good writing,” as well as the community’s notion of what makes a good fan, do not appear to hinge solely on school-based literacy and grammatical conventions. Instead, appreciation for a text seems to be contingent on other elements such as a particular pop cultural aesthetic, readers’ affiliation with the anime characters, the author’s ability to create engaging storylines, as well as the author’s ability and willingness to network and interact with other fans. In this section, I will discuss four types of reviews that are responsive and/or contribute to Nanako’s design of her writing space. These types
include 1) the *OMG Standard*, which is a simple form of positive feedback 2) *Gentle Critique*, which incorporates positive feedback with general suggestions for improvement 3) *Focused Critique*, which incorporates positive feedback with specific suggestions for improvement and 4) *Editorialized Gossip*, which focuses on the anime characters as if they were real life personages. Analysis explores how each of these review formats is in dialogue with some aspect of Nanako’s online presentation of self. As such, they contribute to Nanako’s achieved identity as an anime expert and as an accomplished fanfiction author, as well as to the design of a supportive, interactive writing space. At the same time, these reviews also provide readers with an opportunity to display valued forms of social and intellectual capital for their online peers.

*The OMG Standard*

In an email detailing her perspective on reader reviews, Nanako explains that “The really sweet ones are actually the ones that inspire me the most. Everytime i read them, i feel all fuzzy and happy inside. It gives me a purpose, a reason for my writing (other than for my own enjoyment XD)” (10/23/05). She goes on to explain that “I find the technical-wise suggestions really useful, because it helps me to improve my writing and keep in mind not to make the same mistakes again” (10/23/05). Interestingly enough, the most prevalent review structure, one that I call the *OMG Standard*, is a clear example of readers’ “sweet” responsiveness to Nanako’s stated needs as a writer. OMG is an acronym for the exclamation Oh My God! that is fairly common in Internet Relay Chat (IRC) and online discourse. Basically, this type of review consists of enthusiastic
statements of appreciation for the fiction such as OMG! I love this chapter! Of the two hundred coded review structures, 62 were categorized as *OMG Standard*.

While the structure and surface content of *OMG Standard* reviews may appear simple, when viewed in light of the notion of design and socially-situated identities, it is clear that there is a notable measure of social networking and affiliatory work being done simultaneously as readers display forms of pop cultural, personal, and social knowledge through such reviews. Moreover, the prevalence of OMG Standard reviews for Nanako’s writing is also in keeping with her request that readers overlook her grammatical and spelling errors, as such reviews do not include criticism, but instead provide positive feedback and often some brief encouraging words about features such as plot and character development. Take the following review as an example.

Segment A

1 OMG
2 this is so kawaii!!
3 lol

Segment B

4 i guess I should get to the next chapter then!
5 Lil’ Keko* (7/29/03)

In Lines 1 and 2, the reader, Lil’ Keko, demonstrates her knowledge of IRC/Online discourse through her use of the common acronyms OMG and lol (laugh out loud) and
enacts the identity of a tech-savvy member of online networks. In Line 2, she uses the word *kawaii*, a Japanese term for “cute,” which serves to mark her insider status as an anime fan. Moreover, Nanako also uses this term a great deal in her personal communications with readers, so it also marks the reader’s membership in this fanfiction circle as well. In Line 4 Lil’ Keko uses the modal verb *should* and an exclamation to express a strong sense of obligation to continue reading, as she is aware that “being a fan” in this space involves enthusiastically following Nanako’s chapters and providing reviews throughout a series. This in turn provides impetus for the author to keep writing. Additionally, this “short but sweet” review format allows Lil’ Keko and other readers to comply with Nanako’s end-of-chapter requests that they provide many reviews as motivation for her to continue the series.

*Gentle Critique*

In this section, I focus on reviews that introduce critique in ways that are accepted by Nanako as an English learning writer. Through the analysis and comparison across reviews, I found that reviews including critique often followed a similar structural format. They included: 1) an introduction, personal greeting, or response to an Author’s Note 2) a positive comment on some aspect of the text 3) critique 4) a disclaimer or mitigating statement 5) a positive comment or encouragement to continue writing and 5) a closing. For example, in the first review type, that of *Gentle Critique*, the reader begins by explicitly responding to an Author’s Note in which Nanako claims that her writing “sucks”. The reviewer writes,
Segment A

1 I THINK YOUR WRITING IS GREAT!!!!
2 don't put yourself down
3 ;_;
4 PLZ CONTINUE!!!!!!

Segment B

5 there was just a few convention (grammar, spelling, stuff like that.) mistakes,
6 but you had your reasons.

Segment C

7 REMEMBER YOU *ARE* A GREAT WRITER OK?
8 AND CONTINUE!!! (1/12/2002)

While the reviewer comments on grammatical and spelling errors in Segment B, she also relegates such conventions to the realm of unimportant “stuff” by giving the topic only two lines that are sandwiched between segments that thematically focus on positive comments and encouragement for the author. Moreover, she uses caps, the online equivalent of yelling or raising your voice, and exclamation points to highlight the importance of the segments and lines containing positive feedback and encouragement. In contrast, Line 5, the line containing critique, is not even capitalized at the start of the sentence. Moreover, in the concluding clause of Line 6, the conjunction “but” is a
cohesive device that indicates how the second clause is to be related to the first in Line 5 (Gee, 1999). Specifically, Line 6 renders the “conventions” mentioned in Line 5 unimportant with a mitigating statement acknowledging that Nanako “had [her] reasons” for making errors. Presumably the reader is referring to Nanako’s self-identification as an ELL in the Author’s Notes.

This sort of thematic structure—positive comment; reference to grammatical and spelling errors with an acknowledgement of the author as an ELL; and then encouragement to continue writing—is quite common in reviews of Nanako’s work, as well as within subsections of fanfiction.net that are frequented by young writers and readers. In addition, this type of review often includes specific comments on how much the reader enjoyed elements of the story such as engaging plotlines or characterizations that are either congruent with common fan expectations, such as pairing popular couples, or congruent with the anime canon (the original media that fanfictions are based on), such as adhering to the original character traits. This type of review demonstrates the level of affiliation readers have with the pop cultural subject matter. It also highlights how in this space, writing is deemed valuable not only by virtue of grammatical and conventional correctness, but also by a shared pop cultural aesthetic related to this anime series.

*Focused Critique*

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1 Different canons within fanfiction.net have separate sections on the site, and the demographic and interactional patterns in these spaces can vary significantly. For instance, the writing community surrounding the soap opera *Guiding Light* has a much older fan base that focuses on different aspects of writing than the *Card Captor Sakura* community does.
Another common type of review, that of *Focused Critique*, is one that follows the same structural format and that also includes “sweetness” as well as specific critique and/or “technical-wise suggestions.” The review begins with introductory segments aimed at affiliation with and/or encouragement for the author, then has specific critique sandwiched in the middle, and then includes a disclaimer and/or a conclusion that reaffirms the reader’s status as a fan of that particular author.

Segment A
1  lol.
2  Happy early birthday
3  *gives her sugar*

Segment B
4  I really love your fic.
5  It’s so…sugary
6  lol
7  I like sugar…

Segment C
8  I have a couple of suggestions though.
9  One is this: the past and present tense (sp).
10  Like “I had this to do still”.
11  Two is the spelling every here and there.
and Three, like the wording of some things
like “And thanks again for cheering me up when I’m losing hopes and upset” in the fic.

Segment D

Okay. That’s all.
Sorry for wasting your time.

Segment E

Ja ne

~Chas* (4/22/02)

In Segment A the reviewer, Chas, begins by explicitly answering one of Nanako’s Author’s Notes which stated that it was almost her birthday. Assuming an interactive stance, Chas responds by wishing Nanako a happy birthday and displaying her knowledge of the IRC/online discourse by using the acronym lol and an *emote* (expression of emotion, action, gesture enclosed in asterisks) in which she *offers her some sugar*. In Segment B she goes on to provide positive feedback and to engage in playful textual banter that draws from the multiple meanings of the word sugar. This playful, performative aspect of her review is another common element in online fanfiction feedback. While not as pronounced in this particular post, many readers respond to the online, networked nature of the site by providing feedback as if they were interacting with and performing for an audience.
After these positive and socially-oriented introductory segments, Chas introduces her critiques of the chapter in Segment C. The critiques each begin with a general statement and then narrow to a specific excerpt taken from Nanako’s writing. For instance, in Line 9 the reader makes a general statement about Nanako needing to work on past and present tense. Then, in Line 10 she provides a specific example from Nanako’s writing that should have been written in the present tense (i.e. I still have to do this.) in order to be consistent with the rest of the paragraph. In these critiques, the reader draws on and displays knowledge of a school-based form of feedback as she comments on specific conventions and traits of writing such as grammar, spelling, and word choice. However, what I find particularly interesting here is the disclaimer in Segment D, Line 15. Such disclaimers are a common feature of how readers structure critique in this space. Specifically, most critique is prefaced by positive input and then followed by a disclaimer or mitigating statement of some sort. In this case, it is interesting that the reviewer seems to apologize for taking up the author’s time with the only feedback rooted in a school-based discourse, when she does not add a similar disclaimer/apology after the social and performative lines in Segments A and B.

The next review is also an example of *Focused Critique* in which a reader recasts one of Nanako’s paragraphs. Like the other reviewers, Fire Light* structures her critique with positive feedback, gentle criticism, a disclaimer, and encouragement to continue. She chooses to recast a paragraph containing two grammatical errors that are relatively salient in Nanako’s work, null subjects and comma splices, both of which would be permissible in Nanako’s first language (L1) of Mandarin.
Segment A
1 Hey!
2 Great story!
3 I hope you keep going!

Segment B
4 I just have a little advice for you..
5 In this paragraph you put:

A few minutes passed, Sakura walked out of the bathroom with a towel wrapped tightly around her body. Hummed a tune as she walked into her room. Her school uniform was placed neatly on her bed. She then got dressed quickly and made her way towards the kitchen. There, she saw her worst enemy eating a bowl of cereals. She glared at him murderously and went to check the fridge, to get some eggs, to make herself some pancakes for breakfast.

6 You need to change some things.
7 Instead, for it to make some sense, you could have put:

A few minutes had passed and Sakura walked out of the bathroom with a towel wrapped tightly around her body. Humming a tune, she walked into her room where her school uniform was placed neatly on her bed. She got dressed quickly and then exited and made her way to the kitchen. There, she saw her worst enemy eating a bowl of cereal. She glared at him murderously
and went to check the fridge, to get some eggs, to make herself some pancakes for breakfast.

Segment C

8 That is just an idea! But this story is really great, so continue onegai?!!

9 Fire Light* (12/22/02)

It seems important to note here that in spite of Nanako’s request that readers “overlook” her grammatical and spelling errors, her readers still introduce constructive criticism when they deem it necessary. However, in their critiques, readers only seem to choose errors that are quite salient in Nanako’s work and/or that interfere with their understanding or enjoyment of the text. Most readers are careful to avoid “flaming” the writer and instead work to temper constructive critique with appreciation for other aspects of the writing and encouragement for the author. Moreover, the fact that most Gentle and Focused Critique reviews contain a disclaimer, such as “That is just an idea!” in Line 8, and end with a signal of affiliation and encouragement such as the Japanese term “onegai” in Line 8 meaning “please” or “I beg of you” to continue, seems to indicate that even when making suggestions, readers honor the author’s expertise and authority over the writing.

In spite of her earlier request for readers to overlook errors, in a later Author’s Note Nanako writes that “nice criticizes, comments, compliments, and suggestions are welcome” (Chapter 12). Moreover, she explicitly expresses appreciation for this pointed sort of “technical” feedback in her Thank You List when she responds to Firelight’s
review and writes, “Thank you! I will correct my mistakes! ^__^ *Hugs Fire Light* And thanks for adding me to your favorite list! ^___^.” She also returns to her story and corrects the paragraph per Fire Light’s suggestions. Additionally, in subsequent chapters, she omits subjects less and less frequently, which could indicate that Fire Light’s recasting, as well as other reviewers’ references to this particular feature (See Black in press a. for another example), made Nanako more aware of it in her writing and enabled her to gain a greater command of that aspect of English sentence structure. In addition, there have been instances where Nanako revised a chapter according to readers’ suggestions about the storyline. This suggests a negotiation between the author’s authority over her own writing and the readers’ enjoyment of the text in this space. It seems important for such a balance to exist when all members of the site are so invested in and affiliate around the subject matter.

*Editorialized Gossip*

The last common review type, *Editorialized Gossip*, is one in which the reader discusses anime characters and their exploits as if they were independent of the fanfiction author’s pen. For example, the following reviewer, Spryte Luvver, is reacting to a plot

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2 It is difficult to untangle what grammatical, syntactical, and pragmatic aspects of Nanako’s texts might have changed as a result of focused reader feedback versus those that are a result of her in-school English learning. However, there are several common errors from her earlier texts that readers frequently commented on and pointed out in her writing that are seldom present in her later texts. Such features include null subjects and comma splices in instances that would have been permissible in her first language of Mandarin. Another such feature is quotation marks in the representation of dialogue. Other features that changed, although they were not often commented on by readers, include singular/plural errors, subject/verb agreement, and the use of definite versus indefinite articles. So, while I am unwilling to make any causal claims in terms of writing improvement, it does seem reasonable that receiving a great deal of feedback, engaging in written communication with many native English speakers, and practicing writing on a frequent basis may have contributed a great deal to Nanako’s language development.
twist in which the anime character Meiling comes between a popular couple, Sakura and Syaoran. While the review contains several lines referencing Nanako’s writing, the primary thematic topics in Segments A, B, D, and E are anime characters as active, independent participants in the story. Moreover in Line 11, Spryte Luvver actually threatens to “hop into the story and shake some sense” into the character Meiling.

Segment A
1   OHMYGOD
2   Meiling is such an evil evil evil person!
3   Not evil, evil's cool, but CREUL!

Segment B
4   She really hates Sakura doesn't she!
5   And if she DID love Syaoran,
6   she wouldn't put him through so much torture by torturing Sakura like that! Ugh!

Segment C
8   But the part where Sakura reads the e-mail from "Little Wolf" is so sad!!

Segment D
9   Meiling better figure out what IS the right thing,
10 because if she doesn't,
11 I'm gonna hop into that story and shake some sense into that girl!!
12 lol...

Segment E
13 And it's a very good thing that Sakura took note of Syaoran's format to
14 write e-mails,
15 because otherwise she wouldn't pick up the fact
16 the [that] MEILING IS AN CRUEL PERSON!

Segment F
16 You use different languages in just the right places...
17 it makes the story quite complete.

Segment G
18 But I didn't really like the part where Meiling confesses
19 because it hinted that Syaoran might have FEELINGS for Meiling...
20 I HOPE NOT!

Segment H
21 And I hope Syaoran gets Sakura back
22 because this chapter is really sad,
23 and I want the last chapter to be happy-go-lucky!!
Segment I

24 Will the season finale be followed up by a sequel?
25 I hope! (Spryte Luvver*; 9/6/2003)

This sort of “willing suspension of disbelief” is a common feature in this space and further demonstrates the high level of commitment these writers and readers have to the pop cultural subject matter. Moreover, this review provides additional evidence of reader’s attempts to negotiate with Nanako about her writing. For example, in Segments G and H the reviewer explicitly comments on plot action and concludes each with a line stating her own wishes for the direction of the next chapter. Then, in Segment I, she expresses the wish that Nanako follow the “season finale” with a “sequel” and in each of these three segments, ends by punctuating her wishes with caps and/or exclamation points.

Another interesting aspect of this review that is quite common with Nanako’s readers is how the reviewer expresses appreciation for the multilingual nature of her writing. In fact, Nanako’s fictions often incorporate Japanese, which she is learning at school in Canada, and Mandarin Chinese, her L1. In this particular instance, Nanako has used Mandarin Chinese, also the L1 of Meiling and Syaoran3, to convey intimacy between the two characters in an emotionally-charged portion of the story. However, this is not the preferred couple pairing, and the reader responds emotionally to the effect that Nanako’s use of Chinese has in this particular scene. Specifically, it causes the reader to

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3 The characters Syaoran and Meiling are from Hong Kong, so their L1 is most likely Cantonese rather than Mandarin Chinese. However, Nanako uses a bit of artistic license in this regard. Some readers bring this up, but they still express appreciation for the sentiment created through her use of different languages.
worry that the preferred couple might be in jeopardy. Thus, rather than being viewed as a
deficit or hindrance that interferes with her ability to compose in English, Nanako’s L1 is
recognized as an additive element that contributes positively to her writing and to her
achieved identity as a popular anime fanfiction author.

Implications for Literacy and Language Education:

*Digital Literacies*

Research within the New Literacy Studies and across other professional and
academic domains, has explored broad shifts in our increasingly globalized, networked,
and linguistically and culturally diverse society. A common thread across such work is
the “new division of labor” between people and computers and the imminent divide
between “those who can and those who cannot do valued work in an economy filled with
computers” (Levy & Murnane, 2004, pg. 2). Another commonality is the growing
recognition that traditional forms of literacy, such as print-based reading and writing, are
necessary but not sufficient for effective work (Levy & Murnane, 2004), leisure (Gee,
2004), or academic (Labbo, Reinking, & McKenna, 1998) participation in an information
society (Castells, 1996) that depends on meaning making through an array of “texts”
including conventional print documents, as well as graphic arts, spoken and embodied
language, video, audio, and other forms of online and post-typographic communication
(Lankshear & Knobel, 2003).
This poses a special problem for ELLs and struggling writers and readers in classrooms when they already are ascribed roles as learners who need to focus primarily on learning discrete, technical aspects of print-based reading, writing, and the English language, and are not provided with ample opportunities to “engage in processes of digital composing and reading that will allow them to discover their ideas, to realize communicative goals, and to develop digital fluency” (Labbo, Reinking, & McKenna, 1998). It seems reasonable then, to look at the initiatives school-age ELL writers and readers are already taking in out-of-school spaces, such as fanfiction.net, in terms of how they might be developing the crucial design (Gee, 2004) and key digital literacy skills (Labbo, Reinking, & McKenna, 1998) required for full social, civic, and economic participation in New Capitalist workplaces and an information-focused society. In conclusion then, I would like to return to the three interrelated aspects of design, those of affinity spaces, networks, and identities to discuss what implications research in fanfiction sites might have for literacy and language education in the future.

Affinity Spaces, Networks, and Learning How to Learn

Labbo, Reinking, and McKenna (1998) argue that educators need to view the computer as a tool that can augment thought and “create opportunities for students to digitally encounter, discover, and articulate their thoughts through digital composing and problem solving” (pg. 278) even while engaged in the pursuit of other goals. Fanfiction.net provides a clear example of an affinity space in which members are using digital literacy skills to discover, discuss, and solve writing and reading-related problems,
while at the same time pursuing the goals of developing social networks and affiliating with other fans. This is evident in how Nanako learns to leverage the networked technology and the computer-mediated forms of communication available on fanfiction.net to design an effective learning environment that meets her needs as an ELL and enables her to achieve the online identity of a successful writer. The affordances of online communication allow her to publicly present her writing as a means of discovering and problem solving English language-related issues, while at the same time displaying her expert knowledge as a multilingual speaker and as a fan.

Because there is a wide range of expertise and forms of knowledge that are valued in affinity spaces, and because there is an absence of authorized roles and imposed forms of knowledge, Nanako and her readers are able to maintain confidence while at the same time acting as learners in varying capacities. Writers and readers in this space are also able to draw from various networks of information that are dispersed across people (reviewers, co-writers, fanfiction consultants), tools (spellcheckers, thesauruses), other media, and websites (writing help sites, fan sites). This distributed type of knowledge is also a defining feature of affinity spaces. Thus, in terms of literacy education, fanfiction.net could provide one exemplar for a classroom learning environment where the emphasis, rather than being focused on propositional knowledge that primarily involves the learning of content area facts and figures, is instead moving toward procedural knowledge that involves the acquisition of skills and strategies for how to learn and continue learning (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003) via networks, distributed funds of knowledge, and computers. This procedural knowledge, also described as “expert thinking” and “complex communication” (Levy & Murnane, 2004); the “ability to be a
lifelong learner” and “learning in social contexts” (Labbo, Reinking, & McKenna, 1998); and “progressive, communal knowledge building” (Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1994), is also identified as a key aspect of being digitally literate in a society where resources are increasingly dispersed across computer and Internet networks.

*Popular Culture, Identity, and Critical Media Literacy*

Another set of implications for literacy education relates to the pop cultural subject matter that provides a nexus of affiliation for fanfiction.net. Work within language and literacy studies has begun to emphasize the import of popular culture for students in providing metaphors for the construction of cultural models (Tobin, 2000; Zuengler, 2003), narratives for interpreting and structuring experience (Alvermann, Moon, Hagood, 1999), and semiotic resources for developing social identities through writing (Black, 2005; Dyson, 1997; Jenkins, 2004; Lam, 2000; 2005; Newkirk, 2000). In addition, the preceding analyses reveal how popular culture is an integral component of social affiliations and a springboard for meaningful interactions around language, writing, and literacy on fanfiction.net. Nanako is able to leverage her knowledge of anime culture to practice conventional and pragmatic aspects of English, experiment with different genres of writing, and gain a great deal of discourse or communicative competence in the fanfiction register through her written exchanges with other fans. Readers are able to draw from their knowledge of grammatical and syntactical aspects of English and school-based forms of peer-feedback, as well as their knowledge of anime, to display forms of expertise and to practice and share specialist forms of language (Gee, 2004) with Nanako.
Such activities also enable them to build on their achieved identities as conversant anime fans.

The essential implication here is that substantive literacy instruction does not need to focus on learning as an elite and solitary enterprise centered on authorized interpretations of canonical texts (Newkirk, 2000). Instead, print literacy can be made “more attractive and possible by being imbedded in systems that are, at least initially, more attractive to the learner” (Newkirk, 2000, pg. 297). Such systems might include social scaffolds such as collaborative writing through networks or multimodal writing through digital literacy and online authoring software. Or, such systems might include a range of student-selected pop cultural and current event-related topics in which all students, including ELLs, have a frame of reference and/or a measure of expertise. Choosing such topics can provide a departure point for authentic communication as students use and develop literacy skills to discuss and debate topics and display various forms of expertise in areas that are meaningful and relevant to their achieved identities and social worlds.

Conclusion:

In closing, I am not suggesting that educators adopt popular culture and fanfiction wholesale into their curriculum, as this would certainly diminish its popularity with students. Nonetheless, I do think there is a vital need for educators to critically engage with and develop activities around media and popular culture that are central to students’ lives. Research in fanfiction sites has the potential to expand our understandings of how
new generations of learners are using digital as well as print-based literacies to play agentive roles in designing and negotiating learning spaces, creating and sustaining social networks, and enacting achieved identities as engaged, competent, and literate members of a writing community. Moreover, as Lankshear and Knobel (2003) point out, with the advent of new ICTs and the widespread movement toward globalization, there perhaps have been profound changes, not only in the world of literacies to be known but also in how to know the literacies of world. Thus, as literacy educators and researchers, at minimum, we ought to take note of these changes, and optimally, to learn from these changes and integrate them into our understandings of literacy instruction in schools.

References:


