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Utilizing Affinity Spaces and Critical Literacies for Multi-Media Language Learning:

I Can has l3arning on teh interwebz plz?

by

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Utilizing Affinity Spaces and Critical Literacies for Multi-Media Language

Learning: I Can has l3arning on teh interwebz plz?

In this study I will demonstrate students' personal use of the technology and online affinity spaces outside of the second and foreign language classroom. These affinity spaces allow users to discuss, explore and solve writing and reading related problems while textually constructing and exploring their identities. Language learners' use of fan fiction is the main focus of this analysis because it provides a significant outlet to examine literacy oriented language skills. I will analyze three case studies on language learners' production of fan fiction texts through a critical literacy framework which concentrate on three of the main characteristics of using critical literacy: author awareness of the audience, author's use of resources to influence own writing, and author's use of real-world identity and historical-cultural context to inform writing.

As communication technologies become more prominent in everyday life, many scholarly communities are investigating the effects of an increase of interpersonal and intercultural connection (Gee, 2000). In recent years there has been an increasing amount of research focused on the use of technology in relationship to second (L2) and foreign language education. Much of this research has been centered on technology in the classroom and improving specific language skills¹. Apart from technology used in formal

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¹ By 'specific skills' I draw upon the distinction of functional literacy (being able to decode and interpret a text) and critical literacy (which will be discussed in more detail in the section 'Redefining Literacy.' For the purpose of this study/paper I will concentrate on language skills related to writing, differentiating from the traditionally recognized skills of reading, listening, and oral production of language.

classroom settings, a body of scholarly work is analyzing students' participation online outside of the classroom and opportunities for informal learning.

Before a more detailed review of the research, it would be advantageous to present an authentic illustration of technology –mediated L2 practice outside the classroom that depicts an instance of informal learning, or ‘communication in the wild’ (Thorne, 2010; p. 144) gathered by the author². Alex is a 17-year-old American high school student. While he is a wiz at numbers, Alex sometimes struggles to pass his writing and literature related courses, and finds little meaning and purpose in his foreign language class of Spanish. Until recently, he was not interested in Spanish, and saw it as “just a graduation requirement to do.” Alex participates in air soft gun games with his group of friends and spends much of his free time at home playing the video game *Call of Duty* on Xbox live³.

During one of Alex's late night gaming sessions playing with an unfamiliar group of participants and communicating with his teammates through a headset, preceded to speak to his team members in English with a heavy Spanish accent as a joke. Immediately one of his team members asks Alex where he is from and began to speak to Alex in Spanish. After being taken aback by the unexpectedness of the spoken Spanish directed at him, Alex explained in a mix of English and Spanish that his accent was a ruse. Instead of retribution, the Spanish speaker continued to speak to Alex, and together

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²The author collected the details of this account during an informal conversation with the author's younger brother. This example acts as a prime motivation for the author to peruse this area of research.

³ This game can be played as first person shooter game or as a third person group/team operative option. Xbox live connects players through an Internet connection, and features a multi-player option that allows voice chat to communicate with other team members who can reside in other geographical locations.

they were able to maintain communication about the game and other life-related subjects in a mix of Spanish and English. After this experience, Alex has re-considered his view on learning Spanish. “I have never really liked Spanish before,” said Alex, “but I feel connected with it now..... I actually want to study more. I kinda wish my class went over more than just grammar and vocabulary.”

While this illustration does not exemplify written communication or fan fiction, which is a crucial component of this study, it is an exciting and powerful example of language learning ‘in the wild’ that demonstrates several key points that describe the motivation behind research in field of Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL). The field of CALL focuses on utilizing technology and the Internet for educational projects and to facilitate language learning. There is a division within this field related to research that concentrate on technology use in a formal language education and classroom setting on the one hand, and students’ self-motivated technology use which can lead to informal language learning experiences on the other.

Technology Used in Language Learning: L2 Learners Inside the Classroom and Out in the Wild

In this section I will demonstrate the divergence between scholarly work studying technology as it is utilized in the classroom, and students’ personal use of the technology around them outside of the L2 classroom. While fan fiction is the main focus of this I will continue to use video gaming as an example during this introduction. Studies that have examined the use technology, such as immersive virtual reality games, as a learning tool in the classroom suggest that virtual games create unique spaces for language practice and experimentation that promote language acquisition (Cooke-Plagwitz, 2008; De

Freitas, 2008; Hislope, 2008; O'Brien, Levey & Orich, 2009). These studies suggest that *Second Life* and other virtual reality games may be a beneficial resource, which allows students a wider array of conversational opportunities, cultural experiences, and opportunities for learner autonomy than provided in a traditional classroom. Some of the drawbacks related to these studies of technology in the classroom voice constraints related to logistical issues of the large expense of computer hardware and a high learning curve of navigating these games, which make attainment and incorporation of these technologies difficult for most public and private schools (Hislope, 2008; O'Brien, Levey & Orich, 2009). With these limitations in mind, research focused on students' personal technology use outside of the formal classroom and seeks to identify the distinctions between formal and informal learning environment and practices.

Informal learning is not prompted by the intent of learning, but by personal interest. Alex's experience reveals that during their own time and of their own volition, students have increase exposure to digital and multi-lingual environments, some of which are related to target languages⁴. From L2/foreign language research on informal learning, a reoccurring difficulty is how to validate learning outside of the traditional classroom setting, and how to incorporate informal learning into a formal language setting.

Affinity Spaces and Language Practice

In addition to informal learning, Alex's example points to instances where individuals form groups or communities around a particular interest, but these environments can become a space for practice. Before discussing the impact of affinity

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⁴ Target language is the language being studied. In Alex's case, his target language is Spanish.

spaces in detail in a later section⁵, I want to briefly highlight that learning by means of participation and interaction within a group reflects a social constructivist view in which learning is a social construct (Vygotsky, 1975)⁶. Affinity groups (in Alex's example individuals who wish to play *Call of Duty* and pay for the multiplayer feature) create a social setting to engage in entertainment activities. Yet, this social setting also provided a space for informal learning. The language practice displayed in this illustration instilled a 'connection' between Alex and his target language of Spanish that was not achieved in his formal Spanish class, and demonstrates that informal learning is achieved in ways that are very difficult to reproduce in a formal setting.

Fan Fiction

Of the studies that have focused on the combination of technology and L2 use outside of the classroom, one distinct area of research is carefully following the production of fan fiction texts by L2 learners within communities of interest. Fan fiction is recognized as

“texts that are written by fans about their favorite media and pop cultural icons... (these) texts often extend the plotline of the original series, explore relationships between characters, and expand the timeline of the media by developing prequels, and/or sequels of sorts” (Black, 2007).

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⁵ I will discuss why I have chosen to define online spaces as an Affinity Space or Affinity Group (Gee, 2003) compared to the concept of a Community of Practice (Wagner, 1998; Wagner et. al 2002) in the theoretical background section of this paper

⁶ This study continues the definition of learning as a social construct as described in Social Constructivist Theory.

Studies that have explored fandoms⁷ and fan fiction (Lam, 2000, 2003; Black, 2005; 2006; 2008; 2009a;2009b) examine the literacy and social practices that are involved for English Language Learners (ELLs) to develop the language skills of successful writers and users of English. The fan fiction that is currently being produced by L2 learners offers a pertinent opportunity to examine the role that critical literacy can play in regards of promoting awareness of situational appropriateness, and the process of author identity formation through writing.

Critical Literacy: Awareness and Identity Formation

Finally, although not explicitly stated, this example begins to reveal underlying social structures and appropriate practices that are determined by a affinity space, and how users reflect and conform to group conventions. The awareness of these conventions is often language related within specific social contexts. Although a certain degree of functional language abilities⁸ is required to participate in these groups, to take part in these groups, and to be socially accepted, individuals must use language to identify, evaluate, create, and support information that is shared to enhance and continue a discourse. Each text or discourse is created in a particular way for a specific purpose where language use and style are dependent on situational appropriateness. This awareness of social setting and context in regard to language and meaning correspond with the notion of literacy as a social construct, which draws attention to the context-

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⁷ Fandom is a term used to refer to the subculture that is created around an interest, such as the Harry Potter fandom or My Little Pony fandom where fans feel camaraderie with other fans who a common interest all of the major and minor details of their interest.

⁸This refers to the traditional view of literacy as the ability to inscribe and decode a text. From this point on this will be referred to as 'functional literacy' or 'functional notion on literacy. A more in-depth discussion is found in the theoretical background section.

specific use of reading, writing, and speaking to accomplish particular goals via language and communication. Critical literacy awareness can act as a way to enhance learning through inspection of language use in social interactions and relationships to inform one's writing and identity.

While popular misconceptions continue to construe the use of the Internet as isolating and see social media as detrimental by displacing face-to-face interactions (Turkel, 2011), scholars from a pedagogic background that research technology use and language education argue that many activities online are multi-purposeful and that technology can be used for educational means (Crystal, 2011; Gee, 2003, 2007; Lankshear & Knobel, 2006; Thorne et. al, 2010). In this thesis I will continue the work being done to demythologize the time spent in online activities, specifically in regards to L2 language learners and their interactions in affinity spaces, which utilize discussion fora and fan fiction websites. My research will concentrate on how L2 learners can (and already) utilize new digital media tools, specifically discussion fora and fanfiction web sites, to participate in affinity spaces, which can enhance learning through informal social interactions and identity formation. I will also discuss the role of critical literacy as a means to promote awareness of the contextual nature of language and meaning that learners can apply to all areas of life that employ communication, and can thus be better prepared to adapt to new social situations with varying communicative conditions.

This analysis is based on the work that has been done on ELLs' use of fan fiction, but introduces a critical literacy framework. A critical literacy framework will allow me to examine how ELL authors are influenced by their audience, how the authors draw upon the resources around them to enhance their writing, and how the authors' works are

influenced by their real-world identity situated in a historical and cultural context. As of yet, a critical literacy lens has not been applied to the data gathered on fan fiction written by ELLs, can facilitate and enhance our understanding of the complex literacy practices that occur when the author is creating a fan fiction narrative. In the following section I will describe the theoretical framework that I will use to analyze the current research on language learners' use of fan fiction affinity spaces.

Theoretical Underpinnings

Expanding the Traditional Characterization of Literacy

Information and communication technologies are becoming an increasingly integral part of everyday life, and are transforming the types of texts and the way we read and interpret them. This acknowledgment is motivating a discussion on the meaning of literacy (New London Group, 1996). Traditionally in Western culture, literacy has been recognized as the skills to read and write texts, yet there is a growing division of the definition of the term 'literacy' into two categories: Functional literacy, and literacy reflecting the belief that literacy is a social construct determined by the cultural values and histories it is produced in.

From a functional viewpoint, literacy is seen as the measurable and learnable language skills of inscribing and decoding the symbols that create a text (Kern, 2000). Literacy skills, and the words in a text, are thus limited and reduced to each symbol or word having a one to one ratio of meaning that is literal. From this perspective there is no room for misinterpretation, multiple interpretations, or means to explain the cause of any miscommunication that might arise. A metaphor used to illustrate the notion of functional literacy depicts language as a 'conduit' for information, ideas, thoughts and feelings to be

transferred directly from one person to another (Kern, 2000). Kern argues that as a result of this metaphor, the complex relationship of a text to the context of culture and time period that it was created has been deemphasized. This prevalent yet restricted view of language and literacy has inspired a theoretical discussion of the function and meaning of literacy to different cultures and periods of history (Kern, 2000; Lankshear & McLaren, 1993; New London Group, 1996).

With the rise of Vygotsky's (1997) sociocultural theory and constructivism, literacy has become recognized as more than a set of decoding skills, but as a social construct where each text is situated in social and historical context that can shape its meaning to the reader (Kern, 2000; Lankshear & McLaren, 1993; New London Group, 1996; Vygotsky, 1997). Kern (2000) describes all acts of reading and writing as instances of meaning construction and goes on to say that: *"even the most basic, ordinary acts of communication require interpretation involving the use of resources that extend well beyond the grammar and vocabulary of a language"* (p. 45). With this in mind reading and writing are not passive tasks, but have some type of intention and style that affect the construction of meaning. Along with the social and cultural contextual nature of texts, this viewpoint also argues that language is not neutral in the way that it is used, and that the choice of language use can enforce particular constructs of significance and authority.

Building on this belief, one viewpoint that has arisen out of language pedagogy and theory is that of the need for a new definition of literacy that encompasses the social, contextual, and cultural nature of literacy. Recent discussions of literacy have also included the effects of new communication technologies used in relationship to the understanding of literacy (New London Group, 1996). The term 'multiliteracies' coined

by the New London Group (1996) broadens the understanding of literacy to include more than just texts, but to include any artifact or item that can be used for discursive purposes and meaning. This perspective includes the use of new technologic medias (audio, visual, and aural artifacts) that can also be ‘read’ and interpreted in culturally specific ways since they are situated in a social and historical context. To counter the simplified image of language and texts acting as a ‘conduit’ for direct information transfer between users, the New London Group (1996), Kern (2000), and Kress (2003) have proposed a new ‘Design Metaphor’ that is rooted in Halliday’s (1978) seminal work on language and meaning.

The ‘Design Metaphor’ recognizes that language is a symbolic resource in which reading and writing are acts to communicate and participate in a discourse. In regard to language learning, language users need knowledge of ideational, interpersonal, and textual functions to be successful contributor to discourse; essentially language learning is ‘learning to mean’ (Halliday, 1978). To engage in discourse is also more than just ‘reproducing’ language that has already been used before⁹. In the ‘Design Metaphor’ language users employ the language and meaning resources that are available to them in new and creative ways so that discourse is a ‘recycling’ or restructuring of existing knowledge and resources in new ways to produce new meaning(s) (New London Group, 1996; Kern, 2000; Cope & Kalantziz, 2000; Kress, 2003; Lankshear & Knobel, 2003). The resources that language users draw upon to help them engage in discourse, such as already existing texts or images, is reliant on the recognition¹⁰ of different forms and

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⁹ The understanding of ‘discourse’ expands to beyond language to any artifact that can be used to create meaning.

¹⁰ Individuals can be subconsciously aware of textual differences.

genres of discourse¹¹. This metaphor also recognizes and highlights that during the design process, language learners reconstruct and redesign their own experiences and knowledge to assist in the formation of new utterances and language (meaning).

This last component of the metaphor, which focuses on existing knowledge and experience that is used to engage in discourse and create meaning, is of particular importance to my analysis, and to the field of language pedagogy and second language acquisition. By understanding language as a social practice, the use of language also reflects relationships of power and authority, while providing a platform for agency (Giroux & McLaren, 1989; Kern, 2000; Lankshear & McLaren, 1993; New London Group, 1996; Norton & Toohey, 2004; Pennycook 1999). A critical view of literacy emphasize that authors write with an intended purpose that can affect the way they write and the information that is given. Authors have the ability to purposely or subconsciously manipulate or leave out information to increase the favorability of their viewpoint, act as informational ‘gatekeepers¹²’, and can use text to continue the ‘status’ quo or undermine certain political and cultural groups. In this analysis, I will illustrate the powerful ways in which ELLs engage in these processes in an online environment. Texts can then operate to introduce, enforce, or confront culturally constructed ideologies, authority and identities.

The term ‘critical literacy’ is interpreted and re-defined differently by many educators and scholars based on their understanding and approval of works concerning critical pedagogy by Paulo Feirere, Henry Giroux, Peter McLaren and others

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¹¹ Genre refers to the understanding that different type of texts that have an intended purpose have unique arrangements, situational uses, and social meaning(s) and construction based on this purpose.

¹² See Lewin "Frontiers in Group Dynamics" (1947) and Shoemaker and Vos (2009).

(Feirere, 1970; Giroux & McLaren, 1989; Kern, 2000; Lankshear & McLaren, 1993; New London Group, 1996; Norton & Toohey, 2004; Pennycook, 1999)¹³. To an American audience, the understanding of ‘critical literacy’ being taught in many English Literature classrooms usually entails a critique of cultural norms, typically involving the negative representation of women, LGBT community, and minorities. As a means to ‘critique culture,’ students are introduced and taught how to ‘read’ the ‘unsaid’ messages found in advertisements, music videos, and other items of popular culture that depict and reinforce sociocultural norms and ideologies. For other countries that have adopted critical pedagogical approaches, critical literacy is a means to empower and change social structures where students reclaim and affirm themselves and their culture (Giroux & McLaren, 1989; Lankshear & McLaren, 1993; Norton & Toohey, 2004). For the purpose of this study, I adopt the term ‘critical literacy’ to differentiate from the traditional and functional sense of literacy, and subscribe to the view that in the broadest sense, critical literacy refers to efforts to go beyond surface meaning of a text by questioning the who, what, why, and how of its creation and eventual interpretation (Flowers, 1991; Kern, 2000; Lankshear & McLaren, 1993).

Supporters of critical approaches to literacy and language pedagogy argue for the necessity of fostering language use awareness as a means to shape the way the world is viewed (Brown, 1999; Lohrey, 1998; Kern, 2000; New London Group, 1996; Lankshear & McLaren, 1993; Kress, 2003; VanDuzer & Florez, 2003). In the area of L2 learning (I will now refer to both as ‘L2’), there is a unique and high likelihood that issues related to understanding and interpreting different cultures and worldviews is not only openly

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¹³ For a discussion of critical literacy compared to critical thinking see Kern (2000) and Flowers (1991).

discussed, but also encouraged. The interconnectedness of language with cultural meaning creates a space for heightened awareness of cultural differences, similarities, along with personal and cultural introspection.

In the language classroom, there is an expectation to learn about the culture that speaks the target language, but venturing beyond a superficial awareness of cultural differences can enhance the learning process while examining one's own cultural practices: Who does things this way? Why are things done the way they are? How does this affect my family, my community, and me? "For ESL learners, critical literacy can be a means of comprehensively exploring the new language and culture in which they find themselves" (VanDuzer & Florez, 2003; p. 3). Lessons that employ a critical literacy approach can aid learners while examining a text to question the biases, purposes, and applicability of the information being provided in terms of their own lives, "and consider their own biases, reactions, and realities in relation to the text. Thus, these lessons will contribute to learners' more comprehensive understanding of texts and the larger society" (VanDuzer & Florez, 2003; p. 3). Along with gathering information from a text, learners can also use a text to act as a template for appropriate wording, style, and organization. The awareness of a constant interplay between the reader and text in the meaning-making process facilitates a deeper and reflective interpretation, which can become a transferable and applicable skill for life outside of the classroom. I will illustrate the author's awareness of their audience in the discussion of the three case studies of ELLs writing fan fiction.

A critical literacy approach to language pedagogy provides individuals with the tools to understand, interpret, and question the purpose, content, and the meaning(s) of

the information that they are receiving through a text. By becoming aware of the intent and messages that authors might unconsciously obscure, along with understanding how one's background and experiences can shape the meaning gathered from a text, critical literacy skills also apply when individuals and learners are creating a text. Using a critical framework to teach and enhance literacy skills, educators can change the focus of language instruction from prescriptive norms to appropriateness and effectiveness of use as outlined by Kern (200) while students can learn to "step back from immediate language use to analyze it" (Arnold, 2009; p. 169) to inform their own writing and relationship to an audience.

When writing online and using technology 'in the wild' (Thorne, 2010; p. 144), there is always a potential audience that the author is writing to. In the later section on the three ELL case studies I will discuss how they are aware of an audience. In a classroom setting, a student's main and direct audience(s) is the teacher and peers, and the main purpose of writing and reading involves educational intent. Students often only write for one audience and one purpose, for the teacher the teacher who then supplies explicit language and evaluation. Even with the best intentions and preparation, many tasks and activities that are used in the language classroom create artificial experiences as a means to examine specific grammatical forms and vocabulary.

Kearney (2010) acknowledges and questions the limitations of L2 language learning in formal classrooms as compared to study abroad programs by stating, "...classroom environments are incapable of fostering profound cultural understanding simply because they are physically distant from communities of target language speakers" (p. 332). I would also argue that the same physical distance can also limit

opportunities for the development of critical literacy skills, which is why students' engagement in online affinity groups. This lack of connection to the target culture can be supplemented by Internet communication through collaboration with other classrooms and accessing and interacting with authentic materials such as newspapers, blogs, videos, music and discussion boards online. Yet, incorporating authentic texts and critical literacy skills to heighten awareness of appropriate ways to communicate can be very difficult for educators to create based on requirements of educational institutions where there is little room in the curriculum to stray from preparing for proficiency exams. Critical literacy can bring up compelling discussions of the dynamics of a classroom and formal education system, its value can be seen when considering language use and communication online.

In the context of participation online, even with private settings to obscure one's real identity, there is still an ever present and semi-anonymous audience that can interact and possibly influence other participants. As students frequent and use online technologies to communicate with friends, play games, and read about their interests, they create their own texts in the forms of blogs, tweets, status posts, instant chat conversations, discussion forum contributions, and fan fiction stories. Building an awareness of the presence and influence of an audience on activities online also fosters an awareness of the cultural context, history, and intertextuality of language use and the construction of meaning. "Successful listeners and readers make use of their background knowledge to evaluate what they are hearing or reading.... Learners can be encouraged to question the social, political, and ideological elements in what they hear, say, read, and write" (VanDuzer & Florez, 2003; p. 3). Each textual product can act to address specific

or multiple audiences while creating, exploring, and reinforcing a personal and cultural identity in a global and multi-lingual and cultural context. In my analysis I will describe how personal knowledge of culture, history and environment were utilized and influenced the ELLs' texts.

Affinity Spaces

As students explore their interests online, be it games, music, informational, or pop culture, they can quickly find spaces (websites, discussion forum, etc.) where groups of other users with the similar interests gather to celebrate and discuss a common interest. The way that information and knowledge is shared in these interest groups has led some scholars to categorize them as 'communities of practice' (Thorne, 2008 .....). The term 'communities of practice', as coined by the anthropologists Lave and Wagner (1991), focuses on groups of individuals with a common craft, profession, or interest, and how knowledge is shared within a group outside of a classroom context. In these groups, members learn from each other and knowledge is gained through shared information and experiences (Lave & Wagner, 1991; Wagner, 1998; Wagner et. al 2002). Members of these communities begin as 'novices' and learn through 'apprenticeship' and scaffolding during their interactions with experts (Lave & Wagner, 1991). Although, originally focused on groups of professionals in the physical world, community of practice is now being applied to diverse online groups, ranging from as groups of online gamers (Thorne, 2008) to health related discussion forums (Stommel & Koole, 2010).

While this categorization of communities of practice is being used to understand how users can learn through participation in these online spaces, the definition of 'community of practice' has several limitations. James Gee (2003) suggests that by using

the term ‘community’ implies that there is a sense of individual belonging, clear identity of group members, and visible participation for these online interest communities. The concept of a community of practice creates a problem regarding the labeling and exclusion of users. Due to the nature of many websites, blogs, and wikis, individuals can visit, read, and follow the content made available by a group without participating or making their presence known. The term ‘community of practice’ highlights the actions and participation of active users while excluding many users who do not openly or seldom participate¹⁴, which creates different degrees of membership. Instead of focusing on if a group can be considered a community, Gee suggest focusing on the space(s) and content that allows groups to gather and share their interests.

The limitations of the term ‘communities of practice’ has led Gee (2003) to introduce the concept of ‘Affinity Groups’, and later ‘Affinity Spaces’ (2004) to describe the areas that promote Internet users to congregate and share common interests or affinities. Affinity spaces are virtual spaces where people interact and relate to each other around a common passion and endeavors where background is not as important as the interest that is shared (Black, 200; Gee, 2004). Learning can be achieved in interactions between novices, experts, and different levels of users together compared to in a community of practice that highlights learning between a novice and an expert. An affinity space consists of two main parts: content and interactions. The content of a space is derived from its generator (a game, musical artist, TV show, etc.), and is related to the design of the space. Different spaces, websites, discussion forums, blogs, or email all have different affordances for use based on their design, such as communication

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¹⁴ ‘Lurkers’ is a term for individuals who frequent a site or affinity space, but do not contribute to content or discussions.

functions and time of interaction¹⁵. The design of the space and the content creates resources (characters, themes, vocabulary) for users to draw upon when gathering new information or participating in the space. The content and design of affinity spaces also affects the interactions of users and the social practices of the group.

Pop culture (music, games, comics) is often a source for affinity and affiliation and the highly modifiable and ever changing content of an affinity space also drives the interactions of the users. The content of an affinity space creates a common interest background, which is the basis for users to interact over. These interactions over a similar background/interest in turn help users to organize “their thoughts, beliefs, values, action and social interactions in relationship to the signs and content available in the (affinity) space” (Gee, 2004; p. 27). The behaviors and interactions regarding the content of the affinity space shape the way in which users can demonstrate their expertise on a subject on their own or in conjunction with other users make it unique as compared to a community of practice. Fandoms surrounding *Harry Potter*, *Star Trek*, or Japanese animation are all examples of affinity groups that congregate around a particular interest in specific websites or spaces where they can share and discuss their affinity together.

For the purpose of this study the terms affinity space, affinity group, interest group, and fandom will all refer to this distinction between affinity space and community of practice while concentrating on the affinity spaces created by fandoms for fan fiction. In these affinity spaces, members are required to express their identity through textual means, which can allow for identity formation and experimentation. Identity is also an important concept for language learning which I will discuss in the next section.

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¹⁵ Synchronous vs. asynchronous communication

Identity as a tool for learning

Before reviewing the studies on L2 learners and fan fiction, I would like to take the time to discuss the role of identity as a tool during the language learning process. Language education scholars have discussed the concept of identity building and exploration as a part of language learning (Black, 2005; 2008; Gee, 2000; 2003; Thorne et. al, 2011). One area where students can explore and construct an identity while acquiring and practicing language skills is through writing and textual interaction with others. Opportunities for socialization through text are available and widespread online in the form of affinity spaces, and with text as a communicative genre, there are socially meaningful spaces to practice language while creating and exploring ones' identity (Thorne and Black, 2011).

One approach to defining identity situates ones' identity as the connection between one's internal state and one's performance in society as a product of the cultural and historical context (Gee, 2000). The relationship of 'being' to context and the fluidity of how one is recognized and accepted at any given time and place cannot be over looked. Identity is constructed by the social positioning of the self as compared to the other and is a process that is based on individual actions, thoughts, and feelings. Yet one's identity also relies on contributions and confirmation from others and the environment that one is in (Thorne and Black, 2011). To some, the identity that is outwardly represented and recognized by others and can be seen as a performance that is contextually situated that confirms or reject societal values and standards. This performance, or outside identity, is also connected to an individuals' core identity, what some say is, "who they are on the inside," that outsiders cannot directly access. One's

core identity is more stable and less fluid across different contexts than one's performance identity and other peoples' perceptions (Gee, 2000).

For language learners there is often a discrepancy between their core identity and their performance identity because of their limited proficiency. When language proficiency hinders learners' ability to follow directions or express their needs or wants, outsiders can interpret their actions negatively which can lead to misunderstandings and even discriminatory actions. Misinterpretation and negative perceptions formed by outsiders can enforce, or reinforce, feelings of inadequacy and failure among language learners (Lam, 2000). Learners have a chance to express elements of their core identity textually when participating in online affinity spaces. In affinity spaces, all users are connected by the main interest and value is placed on knowledge of the affinity. Online, learners do not have to identify as a 'language learner', or identify as having any particular quality or role unless chosen to, giving them agency in the way they present themselves online.

An individual's identity differs from a 'role' in the way that identity is a way to organize meaning and is self-representational through social actions and relationships. While identity can be more fluid, roles are set characteristics and functions determined and derived from a norm. Roles such as father, mother, football player, scientist, teacher, or nerd consist of perceived norms are structured by the institutions and organization of society. The weight and influence of dominant institutions may vary, but identity has stronger (personal) meaning than a role (Castells, 1997).

Fundamentally, one's core identity acts as a source of meaning and consists of internalized experiences and themes, roles, and values derived from a historical and

cultural context (Castells, 1997). From a sociological standpoint, one's core identity¹⁶ is constructed by one's historical and cultural environment, but how much and in what ways? Identity draws a distinct parallel to textual works and critical literacy in the way that all identities are situated historically similar to the way a text is a product of its historical context. As an example, the Greek tragedy of Antigone signifies and perpetuates different messages to different readers through out history. To modern day readers Antigone is the hero who stands up against the unjust and cruel ruler, Creon, but when read through the lens of ancient Greek understanding, Antigone is the agent of civil unrest and cultural chaos and where Creon the tragic hero of the story. These two vastly opposing interpretations of the text are reliant on the historical and cultural climate of the individuals who read, or in the case of this play, see it. The play itself has been shaped by other contemporary plays of its time and provided commentary and reference of other ancient texts as a way to situate the story and play of Antigone with in the context of its time. The core identity of this play lies in its characters and unfurling of events, yet it can be understood in a multitude of ways dependant on its audience as related to its historical and cultural context. The symbolic meaning that becomes the identity of Antigone as a text is vastly similar to they way personal identity is constructed and recognized among people.

Identity is constructed and built on historical and cultural materials or resources that are collected and rearranged to form meaning (Castells, 1997). With an awareness of the present, historical, and cultural context, identity formation becomes a continuous and reflexive project (Castells, 1997). To illustrate the importance of context in regards to

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¹⁶ From this point on, identity will represent core identity unless otherwise stated.

identity, I will use one of the ELLs from the case studies and her representation of core identity, performance identity and online identity. During the period of the study, part of Nanako's core identity was that she was an adolescent female of Chinese heritage who immigrated to Canada with her family. She also identified as a shy, hardworking student who liked her science and Japanese classes, and an anime fan. Her performance identity was as a hardworking, but struggling language learner in a new environment. Online she identified herself as a language learner, but was also able to construct an identity of an expert on anime, Asian languages, and Asian cultural practices. Nanako's identity was determined by her experiences in a specific historical and cultural environment. Her interests, biological background, and uncontrollable factors such as being an immigrant, were combined to form an identity for each space she inhabited whether it was in the physical or virtual world.

Identity of language learners

The perspective of identity as constructed within a historical and cultural context, as well as an awareness of the relationship between language and culture presents a unique position for those individuals who are learning a new language. Early research investigating language learning and identity concentrated on the effects of learner personalities, learning styles, and motivations of individual learners (Block, 2007). Current research is now viewing identity and identity formation of language learners, focusing on the diverse social, historical, and cultural contexts in which language learning takes place, and how learners negotiate and sometimes resist the diverse positions those contexts offer them (Block, 2007; Norton, 1995; 2000; Norton & Toohey, 2001; Toohey, K. 2000). Scholars looking at language learners and identity examine the

ways in which language learners understand their position to the world around them in regard to a historical and cultural context, as well as how the learner understands possibilities for the future (Norton & Toohey, 2001).

The context in which individuals learn language is highly variable ranging from acquiring a new language in one's home country with peers who speak the same native language (L1), or in a foreign country when studying abroad or as an immigrant. Language learning occurs in diverse conditions that are influenced by the context in which they are learning the language. As students are learning the L2 and aspects of the associate target culture, students are engaged in identity construction activities regarding their own and the target culture. The way in which learners view and position themselves in relationship to their social and cultural environments can be vastly different when considering those who may be marginalized by parts of society around them¹⁷. Overall, when language learners interact in the second language, be it spoken or written, they are engaging with linguistic and cultural resources to create meaning. In the three case studies, the language learners wrote in English to appeal to a broader audience online, and thus had to use English as a resource to construct their identities. As a result of drawing upon these resources, they are in a process of identity construction and negotiation in relationship to their surroundings.

Language learners, and non-language learners alike, are gaining more access to cultural and historical resources that can be used to situate themselves with in the cultural and historical context with the spread and incorporation of technology into daily life. New cultural resources or artifacts are being created every day online in the form of

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¹⁷ This is often an issue for immigrants who are learning English in America where being multilingual is not a celebrated value.

videos, images, and text. Youtube, status updates on Facebook and twitter, discussion form or blog entries are all commenting on some aspect of an individual's life that others can identify with. Advances in technology and a more globalized society are impacting the way that identity is being constructed and (Thorne and Black, 2011). During the course of this study, I will be concentrating on how language learners express their identities textually in online environments, or affinity spaces.

The affinity spaces utilized by fandoms presents a distinctive niche on the Internet where many individuals gather to converse, share, and celebrate their enjoyment of parts of popular culture as a group with a common interest. In the context of this study, these affinity spaces allow users to “discover, discuss, and solve writing and reading related problems while at the same time perusing the goals of developing social networks and affiliating with other fans” (Black, 2008; p. 72). Text plays an important role in the communication and social practices of these affinity groups, specifically in fandoms surrounding Japanese animation, or anime, and the fan fiction texts that anime inspires.

The increasing number of fan fiction websites and continued popularity with a wide variety of Internet users has motivated attention from the scholarly community, especially from a pedagogical standpoint. Concentrating on writing development in young writers, Henry Jenkins supports using fan fiction as a supplementary means for learning and writing instruction; “... not everything that kids learn from popular culture is bad for them: some of the best writing instruction takes place outside the classroom” (2004, no page). Fans who produce fan fiction texts not only draw upon the cannon, but also their own resources, which include their personal background experiences and

identity. During the writing process, consciously and subconsciously, individuals' writing is scaffolded not only by the canon, but also by cultural artifacts and personal background, which can infuse their identity into the text. In the midst of perusing their interests, L2 learners can also develop literacy skills through writing and identity exploration.

From a pedagogical and second language acquisition¹⁸ standpoint, fan fiction exemplifies elements of sociocultural theory¹⁹ that support learning. Of particular relevance is that writers of fan fiction, often receive positive and corrective feedback from readers which reflects working in group atmosphere and the construct of the Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1997). While writing, individuals are using tools and artifacts from the canon of the story and their lives, to mediate and add meaning to their writing. In conjuncture with a critical literacy framework, students can become aware of their audiences' understanding of these textual artifacts as well as how meaning can be constructed through text. Not only do writers make use of artifacts improve and convey meaning, these resources or tools from the canon also demonstrate an understanding or expertise related to the item of pop culture. This proof of being an 'insider' also solidifies their standing within their affinity space or fandom. These fan fiction websites and the affinity groups that submit the content to the websites also become areas for L2 learners to practice not only their writing skills, but can exercise and experiment with constructing their identity in an informal, and low risk, area compared to in a formalized class setting.

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¹⁸ From now on referred to as SLA.

¹⁹ Also known as socioconstructivism.

As information and communication technologies are becoming more vital part of everyday life, L2 learners can access more authentic materials while creating meaningful texts and connections with other online users who share the same interest. These connections and friendships with other users can act as linguistic and emotional support while learners are creating new texts and textual identities. In the following sections I will continue to review studies focusing on technology inside the L2 classroom and some of the limitations of the classroom that have inspired scholars to study informal learning in 'the wild'. I will then examine the unique spaces of informal learning and practice that are created by affinity spaces with a focus on fandom communities²⁰ and fan fiction. In conclusion I will explore how a critical literacy framework can help to promote awareness of the contextual nature of language and conscious of their identity that can prepared L2 learners to adapt to new social situations with varying communicative conditions.

Technology Used in Language Learning: Inside the Classroom and Out in the Wild

Digital Learning- CALL

Second language acquisition (SLA) research focuses on the factors and conditions that can facilitate or hinder language acquisition along with development and improvement of language pedagogy and methodologies. A growing subfield of SLA is the area of computer assisted language learning (CALL), which studies the applications of computers²¹ in language acquisition (Levey, 1997). Current research in the field of CALL is exploring and outline the educational potentials that digital medias and the Internet offer.

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²⁰ Fandom communities' use of discussion fora

²¹ Now being extended to mobile devices as well

While some scholars suggest using digital resources to keep up with new learning styles of the net generation (Spoderk, 2008), new technology and digital medias are presenting new ways to learn and practice language in and outside the classroom. Students now have 24/7 accesses to authentic materials in the target language, such as texts, music, TV, and culture, opportunities to communication with native speakers, and can receive support from language learning peers as well as native speakers through socializing and collaboration online²². Online there are occasions for negotiation of meaning, improving one's communicative competence and promote learner autonomy through unique and personalized learning experiences. For some students, online environments are perceived as low risk spaces to practice language as compared to face-to-face (F2F) interactions that are common in language learning classes (Beauvois, 1998). Using digital medias to enhance language learning has two distinct areas of research: Technology in the classroom and student use of technology outside of the formal classroom.

This study will focus on students' own self-initiated computer use, specifically regarding discussion boards and fan fiction, but it is beneficial to examine evidence from formal class use of similar mediums. The area of telecollaboration in the class setting presents a unique set of parallels to that of self-initiated use and participation in discussion boards and fan fiction sites. Telecollaboration in the classroom is the use of digital medias to facilitate a space for interaction and communication between language learners in geographically different locations (Guth and Helm, 2011). Communication

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²² For more information on CALL, *Present and Future Promises of CALL: From Theory and Research to New Directions in Language Teacher* (2011) is a wonderful introductory resource.

used in telecollaboration is primarily textual and is often in the form of emails, wikis, and discussion forums between the different participating classes. Studies on telecollaboration have focused on these exchanges to promote language development and cultural awareness development. By participating in textually based telecollaborative activities, studies have found that students' linguistic and sociolinguistic skills improve as well as increased learner motivation and autonomy (Lomicka, 2006; Kotter, 2008). Research on classroom use of telecollaboration where students interact with heritage speakers²³ draws the closest resemblance to the literacy practices, interactions between the author and reader²⁴, and feedback that learners receive from readers when participating in affinity spaces.

The roles of author and reader interaction, along with reader feedback, are of particular importance when analyzing the critical literacy components available when participating in fan fiction communities. While these studies on telecollaboration present instances of textual and collaborative communication that promotes language learning, they are also examples of controlled learning environments, but what about uncontrolled, teacher free learning environments?

This question created the grounds for Hanna & de Nooy's observation that even with telecollaboration in a formal education setting, students are still, "safely within the classroom, virtual through it may be," (2003, p. 73). For their study they chose to observe French language learners navigate and interact within the French public discussion fora, *Le Monde*. This discussion fora, which is associated with the French newspaper of the same title, exists as a space for debate about mostly contemporary, political and cultural

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²³ Also known as native speakers

²⁴ For the purpose of this study, reader and audience will be synonymous.

issues. The study followed four students, David and Laura who were American, and Eleanor and Fleurie, who were English.

All four students referenced that they were French language learners in their opening posts, but to different affects. The English students created new, stand alone messages on the forum, which made explicit requests other users to help them improve their French and that they were looking for conversational partners. Their posts received very few replies that were mostly abrupt and suggested that the students comment on the topic or contribute to the discussion. Both English students did not go on to contribute to the discussion and eventually left the forum.

The American students, David and Laura opening posts were responses to other messages within a discussion thread. Although David and Laura refer to themselves as language learners and apologize for their limited language skills, they did so in combination with an opinion on the topic or a response to other the messages of the discussion. By observing the native speaker submissions as examples of appropriate contributions to the discussion, David and Laura's submissions were accepted and responded to. As are a result, the American students received more feedback to the content and the language of their posts than the French students. David used primarily English in his posts, but was accepted by other users since he was contributing to the discussion and following the unofficial rules of the discussion forum. David and Laura's contributions to the discussion outweighed their limited language proficiency, compared to the stand-alone submissions of Eleanor and Fleurie. The American students were rewarded by the other members of *Le Monde* for their more conscious of appropriate

interactions with their audience and received more feedback and language coaching as a result.

Hanna & de Nooy's study illustrates the importance of becoming aware of the accepted practices within an affinity space as well, the constant if subconscious interaction between author and audience resonate the main principles of critical literacy that have been described in this paper. The focus of Hanna & de Nooy's study on the use of discussion boards provides leads to this study's examination of fan fiction sites which constitute a different type of discussion forum that is being used by language learners outside of the formal setting of the classroom.

The discussion board format is also employed by fan fiction websites, but used for a different purpose. When a fan fiction story is published and archived it resembles the structure of a discussion form. Each new story that is published essentially becomes a new 'thread' that can be commented on in the form of reader reviews. Like the interactions on the discussion forum, fan fiction also embodies different aspects of critical literacy regarding author awareness of audience, using other published works as resources for content and structure, and an opportunity to express one's thoughts, opinions, and identity. Within the narrative of the fan fiction stories and the author's notes (A/N's), and author's textual representation of identity is also combined with the awareness of an audience. In the following section I will survey several of the main studies on learners' self-motivated use of technology in the area of fan fiction and the formation of a successful textual identity.

Identity, Writing and Fan Fiction

The idea of social identity as expressed through writing is a powerful tool for identity formation and for language learning (Black, 2005; Dyson, 1997; Jenkins, 2004; Lam 2000; Thomas, 2007; Newkirk, 2000). Writing narratives are a way for interpreting and structuring experience and can be used as an identity building activity (Alverman, Moon and Hagood, 1999; Thomas, 2008). There is a constant interaction between the real-world person and the “virtual character” or story so that bits and pieces of the author’s online and real- world identity filter through to the text. The definition of projective identity works well when considering how individuals project their values and desires onto their profile page, comments, or in this study the author’s choice of topic, plot, and words that create a fan fiction piece.

This attention to identity, the factors that work together to create our identities, and how we express or represent these identities textually is of great importance when applied to participation in virtual world. The Internet presents a unique and almost unlimited area for individuals to explore and legitimize their identity (or identities) during the identity building process online. With the context of the Internet, and the specific environments created by discussion boards and fan fiction websites, I will draw on the work of Gee’s chapter on identity in his book, *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy* (2003), and the three types of identity he describes.

Gee proposes that Internet users have three multiple identities at once: real, virtual, and projective (2003, p. 52). Gee defines real-world identity as a non-virtual identity based on the personal characteristics that can be biological or interest related, such as white, Hispanic, middle class, religious background, or interests, along with societal roles, such as student, teacher, worker, parent, child, professional etc. (2003). To

Gee, these identities that are constructed within a historical and cultural context that an individual inhabits become relevant when the real-world identity filters through to the virtual identity.

Virtual identity is limited to the identity as a character or avatar that the player has created and uses to play the game. Gee's definition of virtual identity focuses on development of the character, such as determining whether a character is strong or stealthy and what shape dose the character take, is it humanoid, elf or orc. This virtual and visual representation of identity also extends profile pages, such as colors, fonts, images, and links to other websites that users create. The extent of which the process of creation and actions during play reflect the real-world identity is defined as projective identity.

Virtual identity is much more easily seen in online games where there is a virtual and visible character that represents the user. User presence is more difficult to discern on discussion fora or fan fiction cites unless a user posts content to the page. Users who visit affinity spaces but do not contribute to the content of the space are referred to as lurkers. In the lurking stage, it is difficult, if not impossible, to get a sense of a user's identity. By submitting fan fiction stories, comments to a discussion or a reader review, lurkers can gradually become active members in an affinity space. After one's presence is made know, the extent to which other users get a sense of an individual's identity is based on the content of their textual posts and submission. A textual identity constructed through submissions to affinity spaces can be supplemented by a user profile page where users may choose to include biographical information about themselves, options for contact info and links to personal websites and favorite affinity spaces. **In the three case studies**

on language learners that I analyze, the authors made elements of their real-world identity known through incorporating small details into the author's notes section of their stories.

It is through this array of textual contributions that learners can begin to explore their real-world identities in a virtual space and establish themselves as fans and members of an affinity space, skilled authors, and proficient in many digital skills.

These roles and identity²⁵ are relevant to ways that they affect and filter through to become an online identity. The continuing, and most fascinating question to me is, which real-world identity is being reflected in the virtual identity and actions that represent that individual participating online? This question also promotes asking, why make the choices that we make online? Why is this author drawn to Pinterest, tumblr, Facebook, and cooking blogs, but not twitter, Google circles, or MMOs? Since I classify myself as a lurker (part of an affinity space, but not an active participant), what motivates me to post a comment on reddit discussion thread? What part(s) of me, and my identity, are being reflected? These questions are reflected in Gee's description of projective identity, which provides a major platform for my readings of the research on fan fiction.

What Gee defines as projective identity is a term that combines the ideas of projecting one's values and desires on to the virtual character, with "seeing the virtual character as one's own project in the making" (2003, p.55). Projective identity emphasizes the interface between the real-world person and the virtual identity as an avatar, game character, Internet user, and online author (Gee, 2004). Any Internet user has a multitude of choices regarding how, or if, they want to make their presence and personality known online. For this study I will focus on the relationship between the real-

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²⁵ For this study when I refer to identity I am also referring to the multiple identities one can have in the real-world and online.

world identity and the projective identity's role in L2 learners lives and learning experiences, steering away from gaming²⁶ to concentrate on fan fiction.

Fan fiction is not as limited in the matter of choice or a particular code to follow compared to other online activities such as gaming like Gee (2003) describes in his book focusing on games. Personalized game characters or avatars are constrained to what their programming offers, where as fan fiction is as open as the author's imagination. The main restraint that a fan fiction author faces is when a story strays too far from the original cannon. An author must keep his or her readers in mind and appeal to the audience to promote reader reviews and create a following of readers. If the plot or characters of the fan fiction are too vastly changed from the original cannon, other readers can react negatively and create a unsupportive environment where the author may receive few comments, lessen the chance of creating a following, and potential language assistance from readers.

Limitations

While these studies on L2 learners 'self-motivated participation online can provide insight into how students use technology on their own, they do have a limited scope to make note of. As qualitative and longitudinal studies, this research does not provide data from a large group that can be generalized, but powerful individual examples of students who have become successful in their own ways. The lack of quantitative data also reflects the infinite amount of possibility that the Internet presents and how each user has such a unique experience. Part of what adds to the individual and uniqueness of one's experience with the Internet is the ease of finding and joining or

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²⁶ Gaming is its own subfield of the 'learning in the wild' branch of CALL. See Thorne (2011), and Thorne, Black, and Sykes (2009).

creating²⁷ new affinity spaces as well as using multiple spaces to connect over content of interest.

Since these studies focus on one affinity space in detail, it is easy to overlook learner's use of other spaces or how other spaces and websites interact together. In the case of Almon (Lam, 2000), his main affinity space was the website that he created about a J*pop singer, but instant chat also played an important role in his language practice. By meeting people through the website (the main affinity space and content) and then connecting with these same users on sites and CMC mediums (instant chat) illustrates how Internet users may have a 'base' or 'home' website that they prefer, but use multiple spaces to form connections. By using multiple spaces and sites learners can choose to sustain the same identity, or use multiple identifies depending on the affinity space and their relationships with other users.

Language Learners and Fan Fiction: Three Case Studies

Adolescents' gravitation towards anime and the fan fiction stories that popular series inspire has been examined by several different literacy scholars, but few have focused on fan fiction written by language learners (Alverman, Moon, and Hagood, 1999; Chandler-Olcott & Mahar, 2003; Stone, 2008). Scholar Rebecca Black has been one of the primary sources of research on online literacy practices and English Language Learners (ELLs) writers of fan fiction and her work is central for this analysis. Black has presented longitudinal data from a three-year ethnographic study on three adolescent English Language Learners, Nanako, Grace, and Chery-Chan, and their participation in

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²⁷ The website reddit.com is a prime example for the ease of creating a new affinity space about any topic possible. For example there are spaces for users to congregate over the love and interest of grilled cheese sandwiches, the paleo diet, 'fatpeoplestories' and many, many more topics.

the online fan fiction community. These studies have focused on how these ELLs have developed and advanced their writing skills through the composition of fan fiction texts and interactions with their audience and reader reviews²⁸. Black's findings suggest that by involvement and active textual contributions to the fan fiction community, these students are improving their written language skills and have a space that supports identity construction and exploration.

The ethnographic studies conducted by Black all concentrated on Fanfiction.net (FFN) as the main context or affinity space based on its size as one of the largest online fan fiction archives and international popularity which attracts authors from all over the world (Black, 2009). Besides posting or publishing fan fiction narratives for entertainment, readers can also supply reader reviews of the texts that they have read, which creates an environment for peer-review and collaborative writing activities. Opportunities for peer-review and collaboration allow space for authors to improve their writing skills, develop connections with other fans, and facilitate discussion surrounding the composition and genre of stories (Black, 2005; 2007; 2008; 2009; Thorne and Black, 2011).

Along with observing the practices of FFN for three years to, “develop a nuance and contextualized understand of the social, literal, and meaning-making practices that fans engage in through fan communities,” (2009; p. 402) Black also conducted semi-structured interviews through informal emails and instant messenger exchanges with participants about their activities in the fan community, in school, and at home (Black, 2005; 2007; 2008; 2009). These semi-informal interviews took place three to six months

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²⁸I will use the term 'readers' and 'audience(s)' synonymously.

after initial contact, and then once yearly. Part of the focus of the interviews were to establish how and why these ELLs' became interested in fan fiction, what were their reasons for writing fan fiction, the perceived relationship between their fan fiction writings and school based-literacy activities. Additional questions were asked on biographical topics, such as language background, home and family life, and experience with English. The aim of Black's project and the interviews were to "provide insight into ELLs' extracurricular literacy practices, language socialization, and self-representation in online fan fiction websites." (Black, 2009; p. 403).

The three ELLs chosen for this study were selected for specific reasons. All three shared an interest in the same anime series, their activities were somewhat connected through reciprocal reading and submitting reader reviews, and that the three participants were familiar with each others screen names and stories. Black found that Nanako met Grace through an online anime fan community or affinity space and as a result, Grace's fan fiction narratives acted as inspiration for Nanako's fan fiction texts. Nanako originally participated in FFN by reading and reviewing texts where she avidly followed and reviewed Grace's stories. While this relationship between Nanako and Grace was based on author and reader exchanges, Nanako had found another fan fiction author, Cherry-Chan, who lived close to her in Canada, which helped to found an online-offline friendship based on similar interests. Through interviews with the participants, Nanako and Cherry-Chan designate Grace's fictions as a major influence on their writings and served as a model for how to construct a fan fiction text.

Participants

Grace is a fan fiction writer from the Philippines and had been contributing fan fiction stories to FNN since 2001. She grew up speaking Kampampangan, learned Filipino which she used for academic activities, and at age seven began learning English (Black, 2005; 2007; 2008; 2009). English is one of the two official languages in the Philippines, the other being Filipino, and is used in academic, business, legal and media activities, which makes English considered a second language by many in Grace's community. Out of the three ELLs studied, Grace has had largest amount of exposure to English and uses it for classes, to communicate with people online, and to compose fan fiction that would reach a broader online audience. She began to compose fan fiction texts when she was ten years old, but did not post regularly because she did not have a computer at her own home. Grace has been attributed as an influential fan fiction writer among these three participants.

While Cherry-Chan started writing fan fiction much later than Grace and slightly before Nanako, the least amount of analysis has been published on Cherry-Chan so far. Before she was born, Cherry-Chan's family moved from Taiwan to the same city in Canada as Nanako's family, yet her father continued to live and work in Taiwan. During interviews Cherry-Chan she described how she had a distant relationship with her father that was made worse by his constant pressure on her to do well in school. As a second-generation immigrant, Cherry-Chan grew up speaking Mandarin Chinese and Taiwanese at home, but never became literate in Chinese. She learned to read and write in English and began to write fan fiction stories in 2001.

Of the three main figures of the case study, the most information and analysis has been done on Nanako. Nanako was a generation 1.5 immigrant who moved to Canada

from Shanghai when she was 11. She and her family are native Mandarin Chinese speakers, and Nanako was fully literate in Chinese when she arrived in Canada. Both of Nanako's parents were environmental researchers, which contributed to her focused academic effort on the areas of science, mathematics, and engineering. Throughout the interviews and parts of her fan fiction texts, Nanako made clear how "academic achievement was a primary concern in her life" (Black, 2009; p. 405). At first when she arrived in Canada the language barrier made caused her to "struggle through all [her] courses except math" (Email, 2005), and described herself as a quite person which made it difficult to make friends with her English speaking peers.

Because of her language barrier, Nanako felt isolated within her school, but after two years learning English she stumbled upon FNN. On FNN she spent a great amount of time reading and posting reader reviews for anime based fan fictions. The texts that she read eventually became models for her own fan fiction text when she became confident enough to post her own. The fan fiction community Nanako found helped her to develop online friendships, offered a low risk environment for her to practice English and writing skills, as well as an outlet for writing stories about topics she was interested in.

Participants' Texts

For my personal analysis of these texts, I concentrate on three main elements of critical literacy: author acknowledgement of the audience, author's use of resources to influence own writing, and author's use of real-world identity and historical-cultural context to inform the content of their writing. Many fan fiction texts open with a header or Author's Note, abbreviated 'A/N', which act as a method to provide readers with information about the upcoming content such as the media cannon, warnings about

content²⁹, spoiler alerts, character pairings, languages used to write the text, and even story ratings. In these A/Ns the ELL acknowledge their audience reader base³⁰, learners situate themselves as knowledgeable on the cannon they are writing about, and include personal information that describes parts of their real-world identity. I will share three excerpts of introductory headers, or A/Ns, from the stories *Heart Song* by Grace, *Wind Storm* by Cherry-Chan, and *Crazy Love Letters* by Nanako, and highlight the areas in which the authors reference elements of their real-world identities and include explicitly mention audience influence on their writing.

Heart Song

One of Grace's most popular fan fictions on Card Captor Sakura (CCS)³¹ was published in May 2001. In this A/N, Grace's introductory dedication of the story exemplifies not only a reference to her real-world identity as a adolescent female in a relationship, but also reveals that she has some kind of religious background when attributing the successful relationship to a god-figure. This dedication is followed by two disclaimers about the characters from the cannon she is drawing upon, which act to reinforce her knowledge of fan fiction protocol for this affinity space. It also serves to recognize some form of copyright dispute surrounding the textual resources she is using to create meaning in the narrative.

Segment 1: I LOVE YOU SO MUCH PHILP God HAS GIVE YOU! and I REJOICE NOW FOR GOD HAS LED ME TO YOU :D

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²⁹ Acronyms such as 'NSFW' (Not safe for work) are provided in the headings to alert readers to explicit sexual or violent content.

³⁰ In Nanako's case she explicitly states that her story is influence by other writers and the plot of the narrative is based on a character paring that one of her readers prefers.

³¹ *Card Captor Sakura* is focused on a teenage girl who finds out she has magical powers and has to protect her hometown from danger.

Segment 2: Disclaimer: All CCS characters belongs to CLAMP and English is not my FIRST LANGUAGE

Segment 3: Note: another S+S fanfic by Grace

Yeah.. not the Fastest/quickest and yet Poor English Writer from the Philippines.. sighs..

I hope I can handle uh.. 3 new fanfics at the same time.... -.-

Segment 4: Onegai!!! R+R please... I hope you enjoy this fic as much as you enjoy the rest of my fanfics!

Segment 5: I am still doing the Many worlds in 1 story keke I want to make the chapter 4 funny but its hard Demoo... I'll post it tomorrow okay? In the meantime just check out my other fanfics

Segment 6: Heart Song...

Chapter One: The famous Cherry

Ccs Fanfic by Grace

All rights reserved on CLAMP

Segment 7: "PLEASE WELCOME.. OUR VERY OWN!!!!... CHERRY BLOSSOM!!!!!"

The crowds went wild, when the lights went out and they heard a voice....

"Aitai na Aenai na... Setsunai na.. Kono kimochi..."

Then one by one the light went on.. and they saw a shower of Chery Blossoms... the audience gas.. then they heard a voice again....

(Black, 2009; p. 409-408)

Heart Song was updated over a five-year period, the final text was 30 chapters long and Grace received over 1,569 reader reviews (Black, 2009). The three main elements of critical literacy, awareness of audience, using resources to create new meaning or text, and influence of real-world identity and historical-cultural context, are visible in Grace's A/N. Her self-identification as a language learner can affect the way her audience reads her text, such as overlooking grammatical errors and providing constructive reader reviews. In the text she projects a casual tone when addressing

readers as seen in “...I’ll post it tomorrow okay?” and how she candidly asks the audience for readers reviews suggests a friendly and collaborative relationship between the author and the audience. By using the cannon of *Card Captor Sakura* (CCS), Grace is combining textual resources to inform and create new meaning or content in this fan fiction text. Finally, from this excerpt, the reader can identify several real-world identity traits that could potentially influence Grace’s choices when writing such as her religious background (Christianity) and cultural background (Philipino).

Wind Storm

This fan fiction was written two and a half years after Cherry-Chan joined FFN and was at the same time that Cherry-Chan and Nanako were communicating on a regular basis. *Wind Storm* is based on the anime series *Yu-Gi-Oh!*³². Cherry-Chan begins this A/N by announcing that this is her first time publishing a fan fiction and requests for the audience to be ‘gentle.’ She then includes a disclaimer about the copyright of the cannon, implicitly states that she is an ELL, and provides a dedication of the narrative to one of her readers and friends Nanako. After the dedication, Cherry-Chan compares herself and Nanako to the main characters in this fan fiction before disclosing the character paring³³ in this text and a brief summary of the story plot. She then requests reader reviews and announces the title of the story.

Segment 1: HiyahHiyah! Please Keep in mind this is my very very FIRST Fanfiction in the Yuugiou section ^__^; Please Be Gentle!?

Segment 2: Disclaimer- I do not own the Manga/Anime/Card Game Yuugiou

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³² *Yu-Gi-Oh!* is a story that follows a young boy during a card paying tournament where he finds that he is the reincarnation of an Egyptian Pharaoh.

³³ Character pairing refers to writing characters to have matching or different romantic partners than the original cannon.

Segment 3: Warnings- /spelling/grammar errors/ timeline is off at times they may not be exact/ some things may not make sense but bare/ first Yuugiou Fanfiction/

Segment 4: Fanfiction dedication- My Yami – Tanaka Nanako
(123456)[//doushiite//She’s my Yami and I met her by the fic ^^; or was it the other one.. o.o; I forgot..]

Segment 5: Paring(s)- Yami x Anzu

Segment 6:Summary [AU] It was said that Yami and Anzu were destined to be together. Fate had told them they were meant for each other, and it was too good to be true when they were going to be forever official in a couple more years. Everyone was happy for them especially Yami’s parents, but every good thing has a bad thing. Anzu was missing/lost for a couple of years, will Yami ever find Anzu?! Or will Anzu find Yami, This all depends on Fate, For this is a test with many strange obstacles if they are really meant to be, are they or are they not?

Segment 7: Red and Review Onegai

Segment 8: Chapter 1: Gone Forever

“You can’t catch me Yami!” an eleven years old girl stuck her tongue behind her while running around the place. She had long dark hazel hair and the Nile’s crystal eyes; she wore the royal clothing in Egypt. Running around not caring anything what the world has offered her, having her small feet on top of the coarse floor with each step she took made a faint sound with her elegant golden slippers.

(Black, 2009; p. 412)

This fiction was posted in May 2003, but was never updated after this initial submission. Despite this, it still received 30 reviews from other members of the affinity space. Observing this A/N from a critical literacy framework, the excerpt above is a prime example of an author writing for an audience with mixed familiarity. Cherry-Chan dedicates the story to Nanako, indicating that Cherry-Chan is aware of at least one reader, but she goes on to address a larger audience. The request for the audience to be ‘gentle’ since this is Cherry-Chan’s first submission related to the *Yu-Gi-Oh!* canon and requests

reader feedback illustrates a conscious effort to reach out to the potential readers in order to receive favorable feedback. Cherry-Chan utilizes some of the characters and the setting of Ancient Egypt from the established cannon as resources to construct her fan fiction narrative. This A/N does not explicitly refer to as many real-world identity qualities as Grace's A/N, but Cherry-Chan's implicit self-identification as an ELL does suggest that her background may influence later parts of her story. The dedication of the story to Nanako while comparing the author and reader to the characters of this romantic themed fan fiction raises curiosity in their relationship online and in the real-world. There is not enough evidence to propose anything more than a friendship between these two girls, but the strong affection that Cherry-Chan feels for Nanako could be related to her cultural background as an Asian female that would not fit into a North Americans' perception of friendship.

Crazy Love Letters

Crazy Love Letters

This final excerpt by Nanako is taken from one of her most popular stories, published in January of 2003. *Crazy Love Letters* is uses the characters from the CCS cannon and fusing them into a plot that is based on the movie *You've Got Mail*³⁴. In this example, there is evidence of intertextuality in how Nanako's story draws on the themes and plot of a separate story which influences her creation of a new text. Nanako begins the A/N by introducing the title, identifying the genre of the story, romantic pairings³⁵ of characters, and a movie style rating of 'PG-13.' This detail-oriented introduction is followed by directly addressing her audience where she explains this story will be her last

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³⁴ *You Got Mail!* is a film that follows two young adults who fall in love online, but unknowing hate each other in real life.

³⁵ Combination of characters in a relationship that is not in the original cannon.

until her exams are finished. She goes on to dedicate this story to several of her readers, references Grace's stories and writing skills, self-identifies as an ELL, and requests reader feedback.

Segment 1: Crazy Love Letters

By: Tanaka Nanako

Genre: Romanc/Humour

Parings: Sakura/Syaoran, Eriol/Tomoyo

Rating: PG-13

Segment 2: A/N: Hello everyone! This will be my last update, due to the coming exams. ><;, Please forgive me everyone! I will try to update more chapters in Feb. But I'm still not very sure. * sighs * Gomen ne! Thank you all who review this story, this chapter is dedicated to shinningstar, Angel Winged princes of hope and engel hope. Thank you for adding me to your list! * hugs them * ^ _____ ^

Segment 3: My new year wish: I wish I can write as well as Grace and StarJade, demo, ME CAN'T! (V) ^ _____ ^ (V) PEACE!!! (I learned that kawaii sign from my Cherry-Chan ^-^) hehehe so proud! ^-^

Segment 4: Important Note: English is my second language, please excuse my grammar and spelling mistakes. Also, I might have some typos in the story, so hopefully, you guys can look over them.

Segment 5: Chapter 5

Syaoran watched Sakura silently, eh followed her home after the humiliation Mizuki had given her. As much as he hated to admit this, he felt sorry for Sakura. By watching her suffer, he felt his hart arched with pain. He did not know why he was feeling this way.

(Black, 2009; 410-411)

When completed, Nanako wrote 13 chapters and an epilogue in a little over a year and received over 17000 reader reviews while she was writing it. This is a tremendous amount of textual output that would never be seen in a language-learning classroom where written assignments hardly exceed a few pages. In this excerpt the critical literacy

elements of author awareness of audience and incorporating of real-world identity are quite apparent. Nanako is quite candid in her A/N when addressing her reader base and projects a casual relationship, such as in segment 2 when she begins with a personalized greeting, asking for forgiveness, and textually representing a physical hug. She also specifically dedicates this new story to all of her new followers and audience members who submitted reader reviews in an act of appreciation. Even though Nanako knows her readers are aware of her language difficulties, she continues to identify as an ELL; potentially this could be for new readers who are unfamiliar with her previous texts. When Nanako announces that she won't be able to upload any new contributions due to her encroaching exams, she acknowledges her audience's desire for Nanako to produce more stories, which suggests a collaborative relationship between author and audience in story development. Like the example stories before *Crazy Love Letters*, Nanako is also drawing upon the canons she is following to act as resources to inform her writing. In this story, Nanako combines two distinct canons, the characters from CCS and the plot from the movie *You Got Mail* to create a unique story line.

Finally, Nanako is not reserved when incorporating parts of her real-world identity elements and personal desires into the A/N. She is direct when explaining to her audience why she cannot write a new story until after her exams. This admission, along with identifying as an ELL, can be interpreted as Nanako could be having difficulty in school based on her language proficiency, and her anxiety that can be read in segment 2, "I will try to update more chapters in Feb. But I'm still not very sure." In this A/N refers to her historical and cultural context when writing about a New Year's wish where she desires to become a better writer and make's a reference Grace's writing. There is not

enough evidence to suggest that this New Year's wish is solely a Chinese or North American cultural tradition, but it does indicate that this holiday does hold some value in Nanako's life since she included it in her A/N. Overall, in this excerpt and other fan fiction by Nanako, Nanako has included many elements of her real-world identity in her writings. Of the three ELL writers, the most evidence has been gathered on Nanako's experience and in the following section I will look more closely at Nanako's fan fiction texts from a critical literacy framework.

Fan Fiction and Critical Literacy

Of the three case studies described in the previous section, I will now focus on Nanako's fan fiction experience in regard to her use of critical literacy skills. Without explicit evidence of training in a critical literacy framework in interviews with Black (2005; 2007; 2009), Nanako displays three of the main characteristics of using critical literacy: author awareness of the audience, author's use of resources to influence own writing, and author's use of real-world identity and historical-cultural context to inform writing.

In her story writing, A/Ns, and reader reviews, there is evidence of a conscious relationship to an audience. Nanako has access to the original cannon and other fan fiction texts, which can act as a resource and model for her own writings. Evidence of reader feed back on grammar and content of the story allows for the author to "step back from immediate language use to analyze it" (Arnold, 2009) as an individual and collaborative process. Finally, there is indication of Nanako's own background and experiences help to shape the content of the stories she creates.

The interaction between audience and author aligns itself with the main principles of critical literacy that have been described in this paper. A critical view of literacy emphasize that authors write with an intended purpose that can affect the way they write and the information that is given. Authors have the ability to purposely or subconsciously include or exclude information to increase the favorability of their viewpoint and can use text to introduce, enforce, or confront culturally constructed ideologies, authority and identities. In the case of fan fiction the textual representation of identity is also combined with the awareness of an audience. The degree to which the author is conscious of the influence of the audience is variable and there is evidence of different types of interaction between the author and the audience.

Author and the Audience

In some cases there is a clear acknowledgement of an audience, as seen in an ‘author’s note’ as a prelude to a story, The opening author’s note is a space where the author can clarify or summarize parts of the story, offer biographical or relevant author information, and acknowledge readers. Nanako made use of the author’s notes (A/Ns) to directly address her audience. These following examples of A/Ns are from several different stories collected by Black (2008) and Throne and Black (2011).

(1) Important note: English is my second language and I only spoken it for 2.5 years. So please excuse my grammar and spelling mistakes. I might have some typos in the story, so hopefully you guys can over look them.

(2) Anyway, since I did good school, and remembered everything the teacher asked me to, I will be able to have more time for updating my crappy stories

^ _____ ^.....
                                      ''''''''

(3) Thank you all who reviewed this story, and this chapter is dedicated to Sakura Blossomz01, wild-gurl, Sweet ^-^Rose, DZ pals, Fire Light and Lily-Chan. Thank you for adding me to your favorite author list! ^//.//^ THANKS FOR THE GREAT SUPPORT YOU ARE GIVING ME! ^_____^ *hugs reviewers*

(4) Okie, I am trying my best to finish up this story, but I also have to have time to study for my exams. ><;,;,;

In these A/Ns (Black, 2008; Thorne and Black, 2011) Nanako situates herself as a novice language learner and her audience as language experts. By self-identifying as a non-native English speaker, she is “implicitly positioning readers as experts who might notice errors in the text and as responsive audience members who would provide feedback,” (Black, 2009; p 415). This consciousness of the potential reader background as English speakers acts as an attempt to mitigate harsh critiques of potential language related mistakes.

An interesting aspect of these A/Ns is that they represent two interpretations of how readers will interpret and respond to Nanako’s writing. One is that the readers will place value in writing that focuses on form and correctness, while the other is that readers will value writing as a means for communication, function, and message. The majority of reader comments do act as a judges of correctness and give language related advice, but it is because they have been implicitly asked and encouraged to by the messages in the A/Ns. Yet reader reviews are overwhelmingly explicit in their support of the content and interesting story lines over grammatical correctness. Overall, readers are asked to

evaluate the text based on meaning and content, while requests for language related reader feedback is more embedded into the A/Ns.

Apart from using the A/Ns to establish the level of her language proficiency, Nanako uses the A/Ns as a way to dedicate stories to some of her readers, or do ‘shout outs.’ This not only directly acknowledges her readers, but also conveys her attempts to cater to their likes and dislikes. This effort to write stories that cater to a particular character or further develop a favored sub plot, exemplifies how the audience is directly influencing her choices when she is writing. The reader following, as indicated by the mention of names in the dedication also indicate that Nanako has also reached the level of an expert with in the Card Captor Sakura fan fiction community.

Author Resources for Meaning Making

Compared to other online activities such as gaming (Gee, 2003), fan fiction is not as limited in the matter of choice or a particular code to follow. Personalized game characters or avatars are constrained to what their programming offers (Gee, 2003), where as fan fiction is as open as the author’s imagination. The main restraint that a fan fiction author faces is when a story strays too far from the original cannon. An author must keep their readers in mind and appeal to the audience to promote reader reviews and create a following of readers. If the plot or characters of the fan fiction are too vastly changed from the original cannon, other readers can react negatively and create a unsupportive environment where the author may receive few comments, lessen the chance of creating a following, and potential language assistance from readers.

Nanako establishes her knowledge of the anime, or the affinity, through her stories, but more importantly, she demonstrates an understanding of the culture of the

affinity space. The use of emoticons (^_____^), and referring to specific readers in the A/Ns known as a ‘shout out’ indicate her awareness of what constitutes appropriate practices of the fan fiction community and culture of the affinity space. The anime fan community and many anime fan fictions use *Romanji*, or Romanized Japanese words, to identify their interest in all aspects of Japanese and anime culture. Nanako’s use of Romanji in her stories and A/Ns directs attention to her understanding of ways to create meaning as a way to enhance her stories, solidify her position as an anime insider, and connect with other members of the affinity space. The use of *Romanji* suggests a consciousness of what is accepted and expected of writers in this community. Nanako is using critical literacy skills to modify her writing, and as a byproduct, how she communicates meaning with the members of the affinity space. Similar to the pedagogical and linguistic jargon of academics, Nanako has learned and applied the appropriate phrases and content that is acceptable to the cultural environment she is writing in, and it is visible in her written texts.

Author Identity and Historical-Cultural Context

The final feature of critical literacy that I would like to highlight is the understanding and exploring of one’s identity through text. Nanako has maximized opportunity for reader feedback while letting bits of her real-world identity into the story. She not only lets her readers be fully aware of her status as an ELL, but also she is a successful student with a busy life. It is not until later that it is evident that Nanako is using her cultural background to inform her own writing as well. By incorporating her Asian heritage through the use of Mandarin Chinese and Japanese phrases with translation as a way to enhance her writing. In later stories, the reader is made known to

her cultural background, but also a sense of pride and expertise not previously exuded. Her real-world identity as a transcultural and a multilingual individual, helps her to create an online identity as an expert on Asian culture and language.

When writing these stories, Nanako makes use of her cultural and regional location as resources for her writing. As a Chinese immigrant to Canada, some of her texts show a Western influence, such as religious content and the North American locations that her narratives are set. Some of her stories address themes related to her real-world life in efforts to work through her experiences as an Asian female, struggling student, and immigrant. The transitional and explorative nature of her later stories exhibits how narrative writing can act as an identity building activity (Alverman, Moon and Hagood, 1999; Thomas, 2008). Drawing on the anime cannon in conjuncture with the allowance for imagination and creativity in the nature of fan fiction, the stories that Nanako creates explore the relationship of her real-world identity in connection to her imagined life, inner wishes, and goals. These stories express features of her core identity that might not be recognized by others or the society she is currently residing in.

The degree to which she is conscious of this identity building and exploration process is not evident in her writings alone, but provide an illustration of how identity building and exploration can be done textually, and online. Her example of navigating through the multitude of resources available in the fan fiction community illustrates how ELL or other L2 students can utilize affinity spaces for language purposes, but also for cultivating identity and critical literacy skills. While Nanako was not specifically exposed to critical literacy elements, she was able to attain the qualities of a critically literate individual on her own through experience online over time. With help of educators, and

explicit critical literacy training, learners can accelerate and enhance their understanding of the textual and cultural resources available to them through time spent online. Training in a critical literacy framework challenges the student's comprehension of language use in multiple settings, but also challenges students to explore the relationship of their personal identity to their immediate cultural surroundings and the world around them.

Conclusion - Discussion

A subfield of CALL has shifted from a focus on language learning in the classroom to self-initiated tech use and learning in the 'wild.' A pertinent question is why should educators care what students are doing online outside of the classroom? With students already spending extended amounts of time online there is good cause to observe what students are doing and their actual use of literacy in their day-to-day lives. As technology is increasingly infused into our daily lives, the classroom is now one of many places learners can engage with the target language and the classroom does not have to be the main space for language learning (Benson, 2008). Promoting students' active engagement with an L2 beyond the classroom is one of my main goals as an educator, and the use of digital medias can facilitate a connection with the language to help motivate students to study and explore the target language in ways that the formal classroom cannot offer.

The spaces in which individuals learn new information has been described as the "set of contexts, comprised of configurations of activities, material resources and relationships, found in co-located physical or virtual spaces that provide opportunities of learning," also known as a learning ecology (Barron, 2006; p. 6). The multiple settings in and out of school that learning can occur points towards a scholarly focus on what

learners are doing out side of class and they ways in which language learners purposely regulate language learning or language learning as a byproduct of online activity. Access to digital technologies provides students with a portal to literacy development outside of the classroom setting. By observing learners' use and participation in affinity spaces surrounding their interests, favorite forms of entertainment, and infotainment³⁶, language educators and scholars are presented with a gateway to understanding how students use literacy in their everyday lives and if there is language learning opportunities online.

Participation in affinity spaces, places where individuals interact and relate to each other around a common passion, interest or endeavor, provide engaging environments where language skills can be practiced outside of the school setting. For example, Nanako's fan fiction narratives show that after she had begun online friendships with other fan fiction writers, she was able to gather the courage to write her own fan fiction. By creating friendships online and a reader base for her stories, Nanako found a purpose for writing, and because she wrote in English to appeal to a larger audience online, she was implicitly practicing her language skills outside the formal language classroom.

The genre of fan fiction narratives supports a literacy based approach to language teaching and offers examples of complex syntax, different genres, and a high level vocabulary while placing more importance on the content of the story than the grammatical correctness. Some educators, parents, and students alike are afraid that exposure to language online may lead students to learning too much slang or 'incorrect' non-standard language use. Yet Nanako's example shows how readers offer explicit

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³⁶ Gathering information and learning new subjects for entertainment purposes

feedback on her use of grammar and stylistic elements of her writing to help improve her writing skills. While learners need functional literacy skills in order to participate, affinity spaces, fan fiction and other digital medias make literacy “more attractive and possible by being embedded in systems, that are at least initially attractive to the learner (Newkirk, 2000; p. 297). For this study I have analyzed the available evidence through a critical literacy lens to observe how students are utilizing affinity spaces of their own volition and navigating the formation of a textual identity.

For Educators:

Although students use tech for entertainment, socializing and gathering information, many are not fully aware of how to use technology for language learning and practice (Lai & Gu, 2011). In a survey of students learning additional languages at a Chinese university, Lai and Gu (2011) found that three of the biggest obstacles for students to use digital medias to engage with authentic language were access and proficiency in using technology, as well as viewing their online activities as potential learning experiences. Students who were in introductory language courses felt that before could begin to communicate with native speakers they must learn the basic elements of the target language before, and noted that while they would visit websites in the language they were studying, they did not want or feel comfortable contributing at their current proficiency. A vast majority of students are familiar with traditional media, such as TV and music, as a means to interact and become exposed to the target language in authentic ways, but less of these students are aware of, or comfortable using current popular technologies for language purposes.

In efforts to help students see traditional as well as new digital medias as a means to interact and become exposed to the target language in authentic ways, educators can

help foster an awareness of what authentic language materials look like. The reoccurring difficulty that language educators face is how to validate learning outside of the traditional classroom setting while navigating how to incorporate informal learning into a formal language setting since the content taught in a formal L2 classroom setting is focused on teaching formal and academic registers. Thorne and Reinhardt (2008) have proposed a pedagogical framework called “bridging activities” that suggests a resolution for the conflict between teaching formal and informal language use in the classroom, and have students bring potential learning experiences into the classrooms. In this framework students are first encouraged to bring online cultural artifacts students are engaged in and creating, such as facebook status, twitter updates, excerpts from fan fiction or discussion boards, memes, youtube videos or comments, etc. After students collect and present the cultural products they have found, the teacher and students work together to analyze the texts to try to identify the ways in which the cultural artifacts that students are looking at are similar or different to conventional literacy and genre forms. This way, students are encouraged to bring in their own knowledge of textual genres and particular medias. The last element of this framework is to send students back into “the wild” to observe and put into practice what has been discussed in class when participating in the affinity spaces students gravitate towards.

As educators, it can be difficult to intentionally incorporate technology into our class settings due to multiple constraints including time, set content, money, and access to technology in our institutions. While bringing popular digital medias into the classroom may not be currently applicable or recognized as valid exercises, teachers can encourage the use of technology to facilitate the consumption of authentic texts that students find

meaningful. Introducing students to a critical literacy framework should also support promoting student awareness of the technologic tools that are available and how they can be used. Using a critical framework can enhance literacy skills by changing the focus of language instruction from prescriptive norms to how to use language appropriately and in an effective manner that will also help learners to use other texts inform their own writing and relationship to an audience.

Online texts can play a complementary role in literacy-based instruction. The writing and textual resources online can be used to demonstrate different types of styles and conventions when writing while illustrating different genres, formats, style, sentence length complexity, and most importantly, intertextuality³⁷. Explicating the intertextuality of a text can help students to understand references to history, culture and popular culture while building an awareness of the influence of an audience, and the potential influence one wields as an author. The “bridging activities” framework suggested by Thorne and Rheinhardt (2008) in conjunction with a critical literacy framework will help to support students when they are navigating the vast amount of information and resources that are available to them online. By helping students to consciously observe the practices between different affinity spaces, the ‘unofficial rules’ of the Internet, and create an awareness of the author’s relationship to an audience, students will be able to more efficiently adapt to the different structures and practices of the affinity spaces they visit and participate in.

In closing, I suggest that computer mediated communication (CMC) is presenting a multitude of recourses for language learners to practice and explore the target language

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³⁷ The influence or relationship between different texts within a historical context.

and culture and allow for personalized learning experiences on a scale that is hardly observed in a traditional classroom. Fan fiction and other affinity spaces can be used to complement literacy instruction found in the classroom while exposing learners to authentic materials, audience feedback and interaction, and provides a space for identity formation and exploration through writing and text. Adopting popular culture and fan fiction as the main element of a curriculum is not advised as it may diminish its popularity among students and thus lessen the allure of accessing affinity spaces in one's free time. Within research on affinity spaces and fan fiction, there is the potential to understand how new generations of learners are using digital and print-based literacies in their daily lives. Encouraging student initiated technology use should also be supported by a critical literacy frame work that can help students recognize their relationship to the historical and cultural context around them, which will help them make sense of the world and adapt to the challenges presented to them through out life. As educators and researchers, we must at least take note of digital literacy practices online in order to critically evaluate any elements that will most benefit our students and incorporate them into our understanding and approach to literacy that is taught in a school setting.

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