

Today's Fans, Tomorrow's Writers: Fanfiction and Literacy Skills

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Abstract: An exploration of how involvement with fanfiction can aid in developing critical reading and writing skills, and how librarians and educators ought to harness this potential learning tool.

As fanfiction comes out of the shadows and into mainstream culture, more attention ought to be paid to the various ways that involvement with fanfiction can increase reading engagement and literacy skills. Increasingly, teens are using fanfiction communities to carve out their own space and identities, as well as to hone their writing skills.

Engaging with fanfiction can also improve teens' skills as readers. As Henry Jenkins (1992) posits, "fan reading is a social process through which individual interpretations are shaped and reinforced through ongoing discussions with other readers" (p. 39). Jenkins also believes that engagement with fandom results in an experience that is "more fully integrated in to the reader's lives" (p. 39). Through involvement in discussions surrounding fan interpretations teens can become more critical readers of all types of literature.

As teens practice their skills in reading and literary interpretation, they are also honing their writing abilities. A primary component of online fanfiction involves critiquing each other's works, a process which makes teens better writers, readers, and editors. By creating fanfictions teens have the opportunity to experiment with different literary devices, and to experience the process of story writing. As Thomas (2006), points out, the students that participated in her study on fanfiction forums felt that their writing was much improved through interaction with better writers. They also found that they were able to try out different narrative voices, and to play with different gender identities through the anonymity of the Internet, something that they also felt made them better writers, as they were able to avoid being stereotyped and judged on the basis of gender.

Educator Tracey Kell (2009) also believes that fanfiction can provide an excellent learning environment, due to the participatory nature of the discussion boards. She points out that writers will often have a following of readers who also give plot suggestions, writing tips, and ratings.

It is clear that promoting readership and writing of fanfiction can assist in developing critical reading and writing skills. As fanfiction moves more into the commercial realm, and with more authors admitting that they got their start in fanfiction, it could be that fanfiction will be instrumental in shaping and supporting our next generation of writers. Let's not let them down.

Example of fanfiction sites that could be used as resources and inspiration:

Teenink.com: http://www.teenink.com/novels/fan_fiction/

Fictionalley.com: <http://www.fictionalley.org/authors/>

Figment.com: <http://figment.com>

Works Cited

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