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Using Fan Studies to Put Information Literacy in Context: On Teaching a Credit Course with a Theme

Nancy Foasberg

Information Literacy, Writing, and Fans

Critical information literacy is important to me because it recognizes context. It recognizes that libraries and information exist in a raced, gendered, colonized context, and it encourages us to reflect on the processes by which information becomes trusted, prestigious, and/or expensive—and the processes by which other forms of information do *not* become these things. It allows us to understand where the information comes from, the conditions that facilitated or hindered its production, the ways in which information will be used, and what can and cannot be done with it. Critical writing pedagogy allows us to understand writing not as a static skill to be learned and subsequently ported intact into other activities, but rather as a social practice that takes place within a particular community—and reminds us that these practices can be interrogated, challenged, and changed. Similarly, critical information literacy is a good lens through which to look at the ways that information circulates through various communities.

In 2013, I had the opportunity to develop a credit course on writing and information literacy. I was excited about this opportunity because, in such a class, I hoped to consider the contexts in which information exists and the ways in which writing both produces and is produced by its discourse communities. My idea was to focus on the contexts of writing and research through the careful consideration of a particular context; the context I chose was fan culture or fandom.

By fan culture, I mean the communities that have grown up around popular culture artifacts of all kinds. There is no singular fan culture, even around a single media property. Rather, there are myriad locations, groups, and participants in which fan cultures develop, each with their own cultural norms and stylistic rules. In this respect, as in many others, fan cultures are similar to academic cultures, although the particulars of participation are very different.

I chose fan cultures because participation in such communities requires information literacy. There are rules for participation and, in particular, there are specific rules for the use of

information and the kinds of information that are considered valuable within a community. These rules can nurture a thriving community or they can serve to exclude, silence, and harm. The rules of a community are determined in practice by its members, some of whom have more power or prestige than others. I hoped that looking closely at some of these communities would encourage students to become more sensitive to how these norms are established and that they could carry these questions with them into the many other communities they may join. Additionally, I wanted students to consider such communities critically, noticing where they can become harmful. While fan communities can nurture active reading and enable important social connections, they can also uphold misogyny, racism, and homophobia, or become socially toxic in other ways.

Writing and Information Literacy

I mentioned critical writing pedagogy above to explicitly the work that compositionists have done to develop critical pedagogy and because I want to highlight the importance of writing in particular. As Thomson-Bunn points out, defining critical pedagogy continues to be a highly fraught task. Critical educators embrace certain values such as “student empowerment, social justice, liberation, democracy, and responsible citizenship,” but do not necessarily imagine these terms in the same way.¹ I am drawn to Lee’s description of the best possible outcomes of critical writing pedagogy:

We help students envision themselves as writers so that they might recognize and question the different definitions of “authority,” textual logic and structure that are normative in specific contexts. We can identify the forms sanctioned in particular discourse communities, with their attendant logics, subject-positions, and standpoints. We can help them identify the conventions that characterize particular forms and rhetorical contexts. We can also learn from and with them about the choices we have for not accommodating those conventions, for being authorized to object to them, to produce alternative possibilities for our versions and visions. As writers, we will find ourselves operating from within or attempting to enter into contexts that deny our authority, devalue our ideas and experiences, or reject our forms for representing them. Our conception of “better writers” surely includes these possibilities for revision as well.

Recognizing and making choices about how, why, and to and/or for whom we write is also the best of what we do.²

Critical writers, then, are attentive to the contexts in which they write, recognizing the genre expectations formed by the discourse communities in which they find themselves and making conscious decisions about when to comply with these expectations and when to resist them. Notice how closely this hews to information literacy. Lee understands writers within the context of discourse communities whose work forms the scholarly (or nonscholarly!) conversation. She is very concerned with how authority is formed and expressed in writing and is attentive to the ways in which writing necessarily involves particular audiences—the same work librarians do when we ask students to think about different genres of scholarly work and the audiences for which they are created.

The weakness of this definition is its potential for disconnection from students' lives and the lack of an explicit connection to the power relations that govern discourse. Ultimately, I believe that valuing students' voices is a political decision, but to be critical, we must explicitly recognize how issues of race, class, gender, violence, hate, and political oppression affect all discourse communities.

As a librarian who is also a former writing instructor, I am excited by thinkers who recognize information literacy as a type of literacy. Norgaard, pointing out the need for dialogue between writing and rhetoric and information literacy, describes information literacy as a situated literacy: “. . . an embedded or situated cultural practice conditioned by ideology, power, and social context.”³ Recognizing the work that rhetoricians have done to transform writing instruction from a “basic skills” issue to rhetorical, situated literacy approach, he argues that “rhetoricizing” information literacy allows us to “underscore the ways in which language and persuasion are inevitably situated and contingent.”⁴ Elmborg, considering the role of academic librarians in teaching literacy, defines literacy as “the ability to read, interpret, and produce ‘texts’ appropriate and valued within a given community,” noting that “texts” includes both written text and other kinds of media.⁵ Ultimately, he argues that information literacy, as a type of literacy, must be critical.

In thinking of information literacy as a type of literacy, we can recognize that information literacy is not just about recognizing, reading, and interpreting texts but also about responding to them by writing within an appropriate context. Good writing requires a sophisticated

understanding of the ways in which information is situated as well as sensitivity to how other writers have positioned themselves around an issue, both implicitly and explicitly. Experienced writers understand the conventions that signal that they should be recognized as members of a community, including vocabulary, tone, connecting to influential voices within that community, and so forth. Information literacy happens when individuals can recognize these signals and use the context they provide to interpret information. Writers who write back engage with the communities in which writing is produced and can marshal appropriate evidence to challenge or extend the work of others. When I ask students to learn more about information literacy, the questions I want them to ask are about context. I ask them to recognize how an information artifact fits into a larger “conversation” of writing, the implications of the format in which it was published, and authors’ moves to establish their right to speak authoritatively as members of the community in which they are writing.

Indeed, the weakness of credit courses dedicated to both information literacy and to composition is their potential lack of context. “Writing” is not a universal skill transferable across all possible contexts but depends heavily on a recognition of the expectations created by context. The community in which writing takes place governs which assumptions need to be laid out explicitly and which don’t, which arguments can be made with which kinds of evidence, and all sorts of stylistic considerations that may appear minor but in fact contribute significantly to the authority of the author’s voice. Information literacy, too, depends on context—both on *identifying* the context in which a document was created (an increasingly difficult task in a flattened information environment) and on *interpreting* information appropriately based on that context. Burkholder notes that sources draw meaning only from their contexts, and that “divorced from the context that creates them, forms can have no meaning,” but that librarians have nonetheless attempted to create a universal ranking of source reliability.⁶

This is precisely the pitfall I hoped to avoid with the class. I wanted to teach a credit course because I wanted to put information literacy into a context for students; it gave me an opportunity to talk with them about the ways that information is produced, circulated, and used. Fan studies is far from the only choice for a class like this. I attempted to design the class so that my colleagues in the department could teach it with themes of their own choosing. One colleague who has taught the class twice uses an immigrant experience theme; another is developing a film studies approach. However, fan studies is particularly apposite because it describes a set of

communities that communicate largely in writing, it incorporates many different genres of writing, both formal and informal, and it relies very heavily on the appropriate use of information.

Fan Studies and Information Literacy

A major thread in the field of fan studies is understanding fandom as critical work. Henry Jenkins, a major figure in fan studies, notes that “fans have found the very forces that reinforce patriarchal authority to contain tools by which to critique that authority. . . . [T]here is something empowering about what fans do with texts in the process of assimilating them to the particulars of their lives.”⁷ Specifically, Jenkins is interested in fan production and what he calls “participatory culture.” As fans interpret texts and share them with other fans, they develop practices through which they make those texts their own. While Jenkins was an early figure in the quest to “construct an alternative image of fan cultures, one that saw media consumers as active, critically engaged, and creative,”⁸ many other fan studies scholars have followed his lead. A great deal of the fan studies literature is in the ethnographic mode, detailing the way that fans use and transform media for their own purposes. Margolies gives an excellent overview of this along with several examples of the genre, focusing largely on studies of music fandom.⁹ In my class, I have used several examples of this genre, including Lesley Goodman’s “Disappointing Fans: Fandom, Fictional Theory, and the Death of the Author,” which considers fanfiction as an outlet for what Goodman calls “fannish disappointment” and quotes several fans not only resisting but outright scolding the plot developments of the official canon.¹⁰ I have also used McBride and Bird’s “From Smart Fans to Backyard Wrestler: Performance, Context, and Aesthetic Violence,” which considers how professional wrestling fans consider these performances. The article describes two groups of wrestling fans: naïve “Marks” and sophisticated “Smarts,” who respond to professional wrestling very differently.¹¹ Fan studies articles of this kind are very useful in considering the way that participants in very specific communities interpret, analyze, and repurpose texts as a way of forming bonds with one another.

Additionally, these interpretations are often critical in the sense that they challenge the kyriarchal¹² assumptions of media creators. Queer fans and fans of color may write themselves into narratives that exclude them via fanfiction, fan casting, fan art, and other means.

Abrahamson argues that “against the grain” readings of popular works “are a hallmark of fan

activity,” despite the frequent dismay expressed by authors and media producers.¹³ Jenkins describes a fan from India writing an Indian character into *Harry Potter* and some female fans giving the female characters a greater importance in the story.¹⁴ Kustriz gives a more complex example of a novel-length *Stargate Atlantis* fanfiction which “melds at least three primary subjects: political intrigue, including a post-colonial critique, anthropological or sociological analysis of multicultural traditions within speculative history, and interpersonal dynamics, including homoerotic romance.”¹⁵ Fan productivity at its best can add a dimension of critique to popular culture products.

Participatory culture, then, is a kind of critical writing and re-writing. Fans work with and respond to popular culture texts, writing their own voices into the conversation—positioning themselves as both readers and writers. This writing takes place in very specific cultures. The fan cultures that form around different texts are unique from text to text and platform to platform, and the work that fans do is a product of that very specific culture; it has its own genres, conventions, standards, and expectations. Kustritz’s analysis considers the complex relationships among fan works to argue that they can only be truly understood in the context of the community that created them; in fact, outside the context of that community, a fanvid¹⁶ based in the fannish tradition of same-sex romance can instead be interpreted as homophobic.¹⁷ The difference is in the audience and their familiarity with the tropes of slash.¹⁸

There are, of course, many problematic elements within fan culture. It can be used to critique popular culture but also forestall critique. Sperb’s portrayal of fans of Disney’s *Song of the South* demonstrates how fans can use their affection for a piece of media to declare that it is not racist, rejecting all critical readings of the film.¹⁹ This is troubling because fans’ very engagement leads them away from being critical in this case; they are using participatory culture to defend their beloved text against criticism. Convergence can lead to an active desire to seek out more knowledge and make possibly critical connections, but it can also lead to a type of nostalgic defensiveness that can shut down further inquiry.

In other cases, fan defensiveness appears to spring not from the love of a text but from the aggressive enforcement of boundaries intended to exclude those perceived as outsiders. Gamergate, a harassment campaign against prominent women and nonbinary people in gaming, is the most famous example of aggressive fan behavior. While each of Gamergate’s targets was ostensibly targeted for different reasons, all of them had dared to challenge misogyny in video

game culture. Participants in Gamergate organized largely via Reddit.²⁰ Massinari describes Reddit as “a center of geek culture,” but one in which geek culture is enacted as a facet of white masculinity which both “repudiates and reifies elements of hegemonic masculinity” and is often antagonistic toward female participation.²¹ Reddit includes several racist and anti-feminist subreddits, including (perhaps most interestingly) one specifically aimed against Tumblr, a social networking site which is also a “geek” space often perceived to be female dominated and trans-friendly.²² Attacks such as these are motivated or at least accompanied by anxieties about group membership and invasion by outsiders; gamergaters “situate themselves as the ‘real’ victims, oppressed by calls for diversity and at risk of losing ‘their’ games to more inclusive ones.”²³ Thus, this is not *merely* an expression of misogyny (though it is that, obviously), but also a form of gatekeeping.

This, of course, is a very extreme example (and one with many consequences outside the contexts in which it began). However, gatekeeping is a persistent feature within many fan communities. Jancovich addresses questions of authenticity and the “extraordinarily vicious struggles for distinction within and between fan cultures.”²⁴ Condis takes this analysis further by considering how the perception of certain (privileged) fans as more authentic can affect media companies’ decisions about representing marginalized identities. She notes that, under this rhetoric, “*true* gamers and fans are assumed to be straight (or, if they are queer, it is assumed they will remain in the closet while participating in the gaming forum), and out queer gamers and their allies are flagged as disruptive and harmful interlopers.”²⁵ However, even communities dominated by marginalized people can become toxic and engage in harmful gatekeeping activities. The *Steven Universe* fandom is now known for a suicide attempt that took place after legitimate critique of a fan artist’s work crossed the line into outright bullying.²⁶

However, the generative potential of fan spaces remains important. Jenkins argues that, although “there is nothing about participatory culture that would inevitably lead to progressive outcomes,” getting people access to the platforms on which these struggles occur is key.²⁷ Fan cultures can have repercussions in politics and society more generally—both positive and negative. Jenkins uses the Harry Potter Alliance, an activist organization composed of *Harry Potter* fans, as one example of how fan communities may be politically active.²⁸ Other organizations, like Racebending.org, are active within the realm of media itself. When the film adaptation of *Avatar: The Last Airbender* cast white actors in the roles of Asian characters, fans

of the show formed this organization to advocate against whitewashing in media and to advocate for better representation of people of color in general. Lopez notes that Racebending is both an activist movement and a consumer movement: “As consumer-citizens, [fans] use consumption as a site for enacting their politics—their central goal is to impact the film industry through the collective power of their boycott and, in doing so, convey a message about how important racial politics are to them.”²⁹

Using Fan Studies in a Writing/Information Literacy Class

As a subject for inquiry in a research and writing class, fan cultures work very well precisely because of their participatory nature. Fans communicate with each other largely by writing. There are active fan communities on every social media platform and many communities dedicated to specific fandoms. In “Why Heather Can Write,” Jenkins describes the development of a writing community centered around fan writing and shows how participants became dedicated writers in the context of this community, even if they disliked writing for school.³⁰ Korobkova and Black found similar results in their work with One Direction fanfiction writers on Wattpad; these participants were largely students but saw school writing as externally structured and motivated, while their fanfiction was written for pleasure.³¹ Participants in such communities understand the social nature of writing and are writing for a particular audience, perhaps not one they have met face to face but one they know well and a community to which they belong.

Thus, I chose fan culture as a means of looking at the way that writing is part of and produced within very specific cultural contexts. I wanted students to think about how these cultures produced fan outputs and evaluated them. I also wanted them to consider the effects of writing within these cultures—the way that certain kinds of writing may build relationships or help writers not only to participate but also to gain respect and sometimes even power within that community. I also wanted them to think critically about the dynamics of these communities: to recognize that a friendly community may also be exclusionary and that some communities are in fact harmful.

Since the class is about information literacy, I was particularly interested in the role of information as it circulates in fan cultures. Valuable information within a fandom may include a deep understanding of the text, insider knowledge of the way the text is produced, or insights

from other domains. Knowledge of the community itself may also be important; there are traditions and inside jokes, personalities, and histories. The culture in which fan productivity must be understood is complex. Each fan community is unique, even among fans of the same things. For instance, the board game forums of BoardGameGeek and the board gaming community on Twitter may overlap in terms of membership, but they have *very* different concerns and styles of expressing themselves. However, many fan communities are connected to each other and may share a common vocabulary or certain contextual knowledge which makes it easier to understand other fandoms. Thus, fan products must be understood *both* in the context of a particular fan community *and* in the cultures of fandom at large. Stanfill explains how fan production helps to create the fan communities in which it is consumed, in the context of “a set of conventions of both authorship and ownership. . . . Fandom is defined as the group of people who understand what is being done in the fan text.”³² Experienced members of fan communities are sensitive to context.

Of course, all this is also true of academic culture. There are expectations, mutually understood contexts, and a community—or a conversation or a hierarchy—that forms over time. In both cases, entering into the community can be exciting, overwhelming, and productive, but just like fandom, academia can suffer from exclusionary gatekeeping. Historically, first-year composition has often been justified by a supposed “literacy crisis” caused by panic over the inclusion of those groups whose writing is not aligned with the values of the professional middle class.³³ Thus, it has a gatekeeping function that fits comfortably into the gatekeeping that happens throughout the academy as a whole. Piper and Wellman provide a succinct description of mechanisms through which academia more readily welcomes the elite, creating what they call “epistemic inequality” that echoes through hiring, publication, and promotion.³⁴

In both cases, the particulars may be opaque to newcomers, because they come as part of a larger flood of new information, but also difficult for experienced members of the community to notice or articulate, since they are already immersed in it. I hoped that by drawing attention to the social relations that produce fan writing, I could prepare students to attend to the social relations of academic writing, too.

Finally, I need to ensure that the class recognized the place of fandom in culture more generally. Ultimately, fandom is also a kind of capitalist consumption in which what’s at stake is—in the most materialist terms—the relationship of consumers to brands, often brands to which

their very identities have become attached. There are, of course, problems with staking one's identity and relationships on a product. Additionally, the relationships with these brands are fraught. Some brands have tried to capitalize on fandom and fan production. Stanfill describes how Kindle Worlds, a licensed fan fiction project, ignores fan traditions in an attempt to monetize fan productivity.³⁵ Jenkins gives the history of the long and complicated relationship between Lucasfilm and *Star Wars* fans. He cites a policy from an official site active in 2000 which provided resources for fans making films that parodied *Star Wars* or documented their own experience but which also forbade fanfiction.³⁶ As companies attempt to bring fan cultures under their control, they have often favored the more celebratory aspects of fandom (often male-dominated) rather than the critical (and often female-dominated) ones. Without this approval, fandom lives in unexplored legal territory, which means that to understand fandom, it is also important to critically consider the copyright laws that govern it—how they apply to fan communities and whether they should. This situation is exacerbated by lawyers' lack of understanding of fan communities. In a discussion of Marvel Create Your Own, another officially sanctioned platform that encourages fan creativity but with a long list of restrictions, including one against "alternative lifestyles," Klink speculates: "I'm not saying, again, I think all these things are definitely a stick to hit fandom with also, I'm just saying I totally can imagine the lawyer who knows nothing about fanworks and doesn't really care and is highly conservative because they're lawyers and that's what they do, writing this thing."³⁷ While Marvel has not commented on their reasons for the restrictions, these prohibitions suggest a poor understanding of fan creativity and are off-putting to many fans.

In the class, students surprised me with their eagerness to defend the copyright system. When I referred to copyright as an exercise of power, several of them argued passionately that copyright is a right and that creators should be able to shut down fan works. They were uncomfortable with challenges to this system. We had a discussion of fair use, but I would like to think more carefully through some ways to structure this conversation, to ask more questions and encourage them to think deeply about who is served by copyright and what sorts of good *and* harm it can do.

Developing the Class

Since I am championing context here, I should give some context for my development of this class and for the institution in which it took place. Queens College serves a very diverse population; as of fall 2016, 29 percent percent of our students are Asian, 28 percent Hispanic, and 9 percent black. Thirty-two percent were born outside the US mainland, and our students have eighty-eight different native languages. Forty-six percent are Pell grant recipients and 33 percent are first-generation college students.³⁸ This is unsurprising since the surrounding community is also one of the most diverse in the United States. The college often markets itself specifically as a low-cost institution that can assist students in improving their economic status.³⁹ While the assumption that college is a path to the middle class for low-income students can be problematic, and the college's diversity does not guarantee its support for these students, I am lucky to work in an institution in which the participation of diverse students is valued and expected.

Library 170 is a three-credit course that fulfills a writing requirement at Queens College. I developed this course in response to a new general education system mandated by the City University of New York, of which Queens College is a part. This system was unpopular among faculty both because it was imposed from above, bypassing faculty governance, and because it was widely perceived as less rigorous. It did, however, include a second-semester writing requirement. As Queens College has a strong writing-across-the-curriculum program, this requirement was implemented as a disciplinary writing requirement. Faculty in many departments developed courses which could fulfill it by focusing on the genres of writing most important in those fields.

At first glance, the library seems like an odd fit for such a program. After all, information literacy, like writing, is not limited to any particular format or genre. However, as a library running on a subject-specialist model, each of us is particularly sensitive to genres and conventions of one or two given fields. Thus, I hoped that several members of the department would agree to take turns teaching this class, with a variety of themes fitting their interests. This gives us the opportunity to consider how information is circulated in particular contexts and among particular communities. We are aware of the formats, the norms, and some of the gaps. As Simmons writes, "Instruction librarians, especially those with subject specializations, are positioned as simultaneous insiders and outsiders in a discipline; this in-between position places

librarians well to facilitate students' awareness and understanding of disciplinary genres.”⁴⁰ Fan writing includes many genres, and I encourage students to look at these genres more critically.

The support of the writing program, Writing at Queens, was incredibly valuable to the development of this course. I joined a group of faculty developing suitable courses in the disciplines. Kevin Ferguson, the director of the program, provided leadership and a set of goals and deadlines. In this group, we supported each other and provided feedback on our overviews and syllabi. Additionally, this group guided us through the administrative process of submitting our classes to the appropriate committees for approval.

The other important practical consideration was workload. I chose to teach “for time” rather than “for money,” meaning that I could work on the class during my usual workday. While this did increase my workload, it allowed me to make an argument for letting colleagues take on some of my other responsibilities; the second time I taught it, I was granted funds for an adjunct to take on some of my other instruction duties.

Instructor as Fan

I had initially expected that most students who choose to register for a class focusing on fan cultures would be part of some particular fan community and that the work of the class would be to encourage them to delve more deeply into their participation and to theorize or at least intellectualize the workings of the community. As it happened, however, only a handful of students were active in these communities. Most were intrigued by the theme but had never actively participated in a fandom. I should not have been surprised by this. It is a bad habit to think that students will be as nerdy as I am or engaged in the same sorts of things that I am. Nevertheless, students had a lively interest in exploring this world. The research paper was initially designed with the expectations that students would consider the dynamics of some fan community in which they were engaged. Since this was the case for so few of them, I broadened the scope of the final paper, asking students to write about issues affecting fans, or fandoms they researched more broadly, or popular culture itself with some consideration of its audiences. Because students had less personal experience, the readings became more important and took a larger role in our discussions than I'd planned.

I wanted to be very clear with students about my relationship to the subject matter of the course. This is important with any theme, but given the sensitivity of understanding these

communities, I felt it was important to disclose all my own fandoms at the beginning of the class. This lets students know how I understand fandom, and what I do and don't know.

I grew up on the old internet. I did not participate in the bulletin board discussions that existed before the World Wide Web, but in the nineties, I frequented a Loreena McKennitt listserv and, later, a Tolkien discussion forum. I was a more passive fan of *Lost*, reading the fan discussions but not participating. Currently, I'm active in the board gaming community and a different Tolkien community than the one mentioned above, and I keep up passively with webcomics and the podcast *Welcome to Night Vale*.

As I was often asking students to be open about their own experiences and critical of communities to which they might belong, I felt it was important to discuss my own fandom and my varying relationships with the fan communities to which I've belonged. I wanted to establish my base of knowledge as specific and limited. The communities in which I've participated don't function as stand-ins for the "typical" fan community but are specific groups with their own agendas, personalities, rules, and quirks. The communities about which students write also have their own, very specific characteristics. I wanted students to own their expertise about these communities and to realize it's probably different from mine.

I also hoped to humanize not only myself but information resources. I write and publish in many different places, in many styles, on many subjects. Students often do the same, even if they may not realize it—their social media writing is writing just as much as the papers they write for school. So often, we talk about journal articles as commodities rather than a form of communication created by human beings. I had students read a blog post and a scholarly article by the same author and would like in the future to include more readings of this type. The point of source evaluation is not that a journal article is a *thing* with specific characteristics, but that authors make particular choices when we write for specific audiences—that style and genre aren't about fulfilling requirements but about the relationship between author and reader.

Finally, it allows me to begin conversations with examples from my own life, especially when I need to encourage students to be critical. I love being part of the board gaming community, but I can also talk about the times I've experienced misogyny in that community and possibly open up space for students to discuss the sexism, racism, and homophobia in other fan communities, perhaps their own. I wouldn't want to ask students to expose their communities without taking a similar risk on my own part. Additionally, it gives me the grounds to be

skeptical when students *aren't* inclined to be critical. For instance, I have heard students talk about their communities as being exceptional among web communities in their friendliness; I have enough experience to know that many communities describe themselves that way and even use it to excuse bad behavior by framing the internet as a tough place and themselves as an oasis which their critics do not properly appreciate.

By invoking my own experiences, I hope to create a dialogue about fandom rather than an environment in which fan communities are exposed to the academic gaze. Additionally, I make it as clear as I can that my expertise is bounded. When it comes to other communities, my students are the experts and I can sincerely expect to learn from them.

They challenged me, too. A student pointed out that the class needed more readings that looked at race and class specifically. We discussed these issues in class, but the readings were more focused on issues related to gender and sexuality. I have complicated feelings about this. I'm very pleased that she was considering the role of these factors and that I'd created an environment in which she felt comfortable bringing this up with me. At the same time, I also believe that the burden of pointing these things out should not be on students, particularly students of color. I will continue to think harder about how I can make sure that the class is more inclusive of all students and how it can be more conscious and critical of the practices of fan studies itself. Although as a discipline, fan studies has often focused on the practices of middle-class, white fans, paying attention to the work done by and about people of color in fan communities is essential. As Wanzo argues, "Many claims in fan scholarship about alterity, fan interpellation, ambivalent spectatorship, and anti-fandom become more nuanced if we look at particular traditions of African American fandom and black cultural criticism."⁴¹

Writing Assignments

I used three major assignments in the class. Early in the semester, I asked students to edit a Wikipedia page related to an interest of theirs and reflect on their experience. This was especially important for those students who had not previously been active in fan communities. I wanted them to experience public writing within a particular community. Wikipedia is useful because it has its own community and its own set of rules and conventions; students could observe first-hand the way that the community encouraged and even enforced a certain style of writing. Additionally, because sources are key to writing in Wikipedia, this provided a sort of

early exposure to at least one way that sources are valued within a community. There are specific rules about what kinds of sources are most useful and how they should be incorporated. The work that sources do in this kind of writing is the kind of work to which students are accustomed, and sources in Wikipedia are a way of proving that what you have written is accurate. As the course goes on, students will end up using sources in very different ways. As we approach this assignment, I asked them to look at some of the differences between Wikipedia and TVTropes, a wiki that focuses on compiling tropes used in fiction. We compared articles that cover the same ground (for instance, the two articles about *Welcome to Night Vale*), paying attention to the differences between them—not just in their subject matter but also differences that encompass the style and the purpose of each wiki. This was a useful jumping-off point for a discussion of how different context dictates style.

Many of the students had not written publicly before and were very uncomfortable making their writing public. It is true that there are risks associated with this. I have written above about the potential for abuse when participating in online communities. Even setting aside the risk of abuse, which I believe is low in this case, students are attempting to enter into a new community without much experience. This can certainly feel scary and uncomfortable—but also consequential. As they worked with Wikipedia, I did not specify what kind of an edit they needed to make or how many; I just wanted them to experience writing within a specific, authentic social context. I did not grade their contributions; rather, I asked them to write a reflection about their experience and graded that, reducing the pressure on students to perform well in an unfamiliar genre. Additionally, we explicitly discussed this uneasiness in class.

In the second major assignment, students analyzed the use of sources in a scholarly journal article or book chapter. I used this assignment to move students away from the perception that sources are a way of “backing up” an argument and instead thinking more specifically about the work that sources can do—providing context, representing a common argument with which students disagree, beginning an argument that the student may then extend, and so on. This assignment is based on an abridged version of an article by Mark Gaipa that lists various rhetorical moves that scholars often make with sources, and cartoons to illustrate them.⁴² This article provides us with a useful and accessible vocabulary for discussing the different rhetorical moves that writers make using sources, such as leapfrogging, ass-kissing, cross-pollinating, and more. At this point in the class, students are also reading both scholarly sources in the discipline

of fan studies and more informal, fan-written sources and paying particular attention to the ways that information is used and what kinds of information are considered valuable in which contexts. Sources are used differently in fannish communities than in scholarly sources, and the scholarly sources cite both kinds of materials. In these discussions with students, discussions about primary and secondary sources have emerged organically. I want students to come away with an understanding that authors use multiple kinds of sources in their work; these sources serve different purposes, and different kinds of sources are valued in different communities. Students use the framework we've developed to analyze how sources are used in academic articles as a way of thinking more reflectively about the research paper they are about to write.

Finally, I assigned a research paper in which students chose a fan community or practice and analyzed it. This is the most traditional of the assignments, but students have been more creative with it than with any of the other assignments. Most students were engaged with the theme and many challenged themselves to produce more structurally complex writing than they had in the past. Additionally, by building up trust over the course of the semester, encouraging wide-ranging and thoughtful discussions among students and providing a wide variety of readings, I hope that I encouraged students to exercise their creativity. Students have made arguments about copyright and fair use, about “dark fandoms” such as those comprising the fans of school shooters, about the role of race and gender in fandom, the relationships of fans to producers, and about the status of e-sports as sporting events. Students identified very specific issues within the fandoms or cultural properties about which they wanted to write and often engaged with sources in interesting ways. Their relationships to the fandoms about which they wrote varied widely, from novice to enthusiast to skeptic. In some cases, I am familiar with the topics under consideration, but in most cases, students delve into fandoms of which I know very little. This is by design. Although I have my own history of fandom, fan communities are myriad, and my knowledge is necessarily circumscribed by my own experience. This means that students who are involved in or have at least researched other communities will be able to teach me something about these communities—what they offer to their participants, the rules that govern this community, the hierarchies that form, and their approach to the material itself. This approach casts students as experts or at least as learners who can share what they know.

Class Readings

Because the class was about writing *about* fandom, rather than writing *in* fandom, academic writing models what students were doing in the class more closely than the genres of writing used in fan communities. However, I took care to include both academic and non-academic readings in the class. It was important to include texts from fan communities in order to let them speak for themselves. There is a history of pathologizing fans as social misfits or violent threats as “disreputable, even dangerous ‘others’.”⁴³ Even sources by aca-fans⁴⁴ take fandom as a subject of study, which can be alienating. Cristofari and Guitton argue that, ethically, the authors of texts on fan communities should be full members of this community so that when they expose the community’s practices to the academic gaze, they themselves undergo the same risk.⁴⁵ Korobkova and Black discuss the reluctance of members of fan communities to share these communities with authority figures.⁴⁶ Thus, while there may be some ethical problems with sharing fan texts outside the context in which they were created, it is still more problematic to look at fandoms through *only* an academic lens.

However, the scholarly readings were also important. They served as models for the writing students were to do, and we spent time reading through them carefully to understand how they were put together and, particularly, the ways they used sources. I wanted students to understand sources in a more complex way. When I ask what kinds of work sources can do, students often respond that the sources “back up their argument,” as if the source were an authority nodding approvingly at whatever they write. More practiced writers in both fan and academic communities consider sources very differently—as a launching point for arguments of their own, an opponent in an argument, or simply as a context or a background. Much has been written about fanfiction as critical reading that resists the textual canon (Goodman cites one fan who feels that canon “needs to sit in the corner and think about what it’s done”).⁴⁷ Other types of fan production can also read their sources critically; for example, fan art may portray characters in ostensibly white media as being of color, and cosplay can be used to turn Darth Vader pink. Scholarly writers are also critical readers of their sources, but their critical reading is very different from the kinds of readings that fans do. I use the Gaipa article mentioned above to give students a vocabulary with which to describe these interactions with sources.⁴⁸ I also want them to understand that both fandom and popular culture are legitimate objects of study, that a community of scholars exists around this and that popular culture—the stuff of their everyday lives—can be and is taken seriously.

The first time I taught the class, I used non-academic readings early and trended toward more academic writings later in the class; the second time I taught it, I paired academic and non-academic writings about the same topics. For instance, one week early in the class, I used an academic article on digital fandom and communities of practice along with a Tumblr post about the term “feels” used to describe the affective fan experience.⁴⁹ Both readings considered the rhetoric specific to a particular fan community but in very different language. We talked about vocabulary as a marker of membership in the community and how both articles used it, and we discussed the differences *among* fan cultures.

These varied non-academic sources are valuable in two different ways. They have value within the communities in which they were created and they are of use in understanding those communities or making arguments about them. The class is not an argument that all information is of equal value. Rather, I urged students to be cognizant of how different kinds of materials served several different purposes within an argument.

The Class and the Future

If I teach this class again in the future, I will make several changes. I last taught this class in the spring of 2016. That year, we saw fan cultures—or fanlike cultures—play a major role in the election of an explicitly racist, misogynist, and xenophobic presidential administration.⁵⁰ In this context, the negative aspects of fandom are much more urgent to discuss, and it is crucial to grapple even more explicitly with the potential for fandom to become harmful and dangerous, as well as the means by which these forces may be challenged. Fan cultures cannot be seen as simply “fun.” I would also continue to look for new readings; I need more readings that cover issues of class and race, international fandoms, and some covering the damage that fan cultures have done. Additionally, I may reorganize the assignments, putting the Wikipedia assignment near the end of the semester and asking students to work together from the beginning so that the movement is outward, from the supportive environment of the class to the broader context of an online community.

I found the class deeply worthwhile. Although it is a considerable investment of time and energy, this prolonged work with students has created an opportunity for us to have deeper, more interesting, and more concrete conversations about where information comes from, how it circulates, and what they can do with it. In a credit course, these conversations can build on each

other over the course of a semester, so ideas about information of whatever sort can be more carefully considered, revisited, and put in several different contexts. Meanwhile, as students become more comfortable with the class dynamics, conversations about their own experiences with the communities in which information circulates become possible. To create these discussions, however, a focus of some sort is necessary. Information produces and is produced within specific communities; only by examining these communities can we (librarians *and* students) properly understand the social aspects of information.

Endnotes

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5. James Elmborg, "Critical Information Literacy: Implications for Instructional Practice," *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 32, no. 2 (2006): 195.
6. Joel Burkholder, "Redefining Sources as Social Acts: Genre Theory in Information Literacy Instruction," *Library Philosophy and Practice* (2010), accessed February 27, 2018, <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/libphilprac/413/>.
7. Henry Jenkins, *Fans, Bloggers and Gamers* (New York: NYU Press, 2006), 1.
8. Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 284.
9. Daniel S. Margolies, "Ethnographic and Folkloristic Study of Popular Culture," in *A Companion to Popular Culture*, ed. Gary Burns (Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons), 48–62.
10. Lesley Goodman, "Disappointing Fans: Fandom, Fictional Theory, and the Death of the Author," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 48, no. 4 (2015): 664.

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11. Lawrence McBride and S. Elizabeth Bird, “From Smart Fan to Backyard Wrestler: Performance, Context and Aesthetic Violence,” in *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*, eds. C. Harrington, Jonathan Gray, and Cornel Sandvoss (New York: NYU Press, 2007): 165–76.
12. “Kyriarchy” is a word coined by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza to describe overlapping and mutually reinforcing systems of oppression. It not only expands the notion of patriarchy to recognize racism, ableism, homophobia, cissexism, classism, and other systems of oppression, but also allows us to recognize how groups focused on resisting only one axis of oppression (for instance, white feminists) can easily become oppressors along other axes. In this way, it is intimately connected to Kimberlé Crenshaw’s theory of intersectionality. The blogger Lisa of *My Ecdysis* introduced the word kyriarchy to popular feminist online discourse in 2008 and clarified her use of the term here: <http://www.myeecdysis.com/2010/11/truthout-about-kyriarchy-an-open-letter-to-feminist-writers-bloggers-and-journalists/>.
13. Megan B. Abrahamson, “J.R.R. Tolkien, Fanfiction, and ‘the Freedom of the Reader,’” *Mythlore* 32 (2013): 64.
14. Henry Jenkins, “Why Heather Can Write,” in *Convergence Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2006): 174.
15. Anne Kustritz, “Seriality and Transmediality in the Fan Multiverse: Flexible and Multiple Narrative Structures in Fan Fiction, Art and Vids,” *TV Series* 6 (2014): 240, accessed February 27, 2018, <http://tvseries.revues.org/331>.
16. Fanvids, or “vids,” are fan-made video collages.
17. Kustritz, “Seriality and Transmediality.”
18. “Slash” refers to homoerotic fanfiction.
19. Jason Sperb, “Reassuring Convergence: Online Fandom, Race, and Disney’s Notorious Song of the South,” *Cinema Journal* 49, no. 4 (2010): 25–45.
20. Reddit, which describes itself as “the front page of the internet,” is a social media site focused on sharing and discussing links. It is structured as a myriad of separate forums, each with its own culture and norms. Because there is very little content that Reddit has designated as unacceptable, the platform includes fun and innocuous forums but also deeply racist, sexist, and otherwise oppressive ones, including troll forums. (Alfonso)

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21. Adrienne Massinari, “#Gamergate and the Fapping: How Reddit’s Algorithm, Governance and Culture Support Toxic Technocultures,” *New Media and Society* 19, no. 3 (2017): 329–46.
22. The phrase “tumblr gender” is often used to describe unusual or unfamiliar genders, usually but not always in a hostile way. (Yae)
23. Andrea Brathwaite, “It’s About Ethics in Games Journalism? Gamergaters and Geek Masculinity,” *Social Media + Society* (2016): 1–10, doi:10.1177/2056305116672484.
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31. Ksenia A. Korobkova and Rebecca W. Black, “Contrasting Visions: Identity, Literacy, and Boundary Work in a Fan Community,” *E-Learning and Digital Media* 11, no. 6 (2014): 619–32.
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35. Stanfill, "Fandom, Public, Commons."
36. Henry Jenkins, "Quentin Tarantino's *Star Wars*?" in *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006): 154.
37. Flourish Klink and Elizabeth Minkel, "Episode 65: Fandom and Capitalism," January 12, 2018, in *Fansplaining*, podcast, transcript accessed February 27, 2018, <http://fansplaining.com/post/169619454448/transcript-episode-65-fandom-and-capitalism>. Many other articles agree that Marvel's caution may originate in their legal department, including Kaitlyn Tiffany, "Marvel Wants You to Write Comics with no Farts, Death, Aliens, Gossip, or 'Social Issues,'" *The Verge*, December 28, 2017, accessed February 27, 2018, <https://www.theverge.com/tldr/2017/12/28/16827356/marvel-comics-create-your-own-platform-terms-restrictions>; and Albert Ching, "Marvel Invites You to Create Your Own Comics, with Lots of Restrictions," *CBR*, December 28, 2017, accessed February 27, 2018, <https://www.cbr.com/marvel-create-your-own-restrictions-controversy/>.
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43. Joli Jenson, "Fandom as Pathology: The Consequences of Characterization," *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media* (London: Routledge, 1992), 9.

44. "Aca-fans" are academics who are also fans and study the communities in which they participate.

45. Cé Cristofari and Mattieu J. Guitton, "Aca-Fans and Fan Communities: An Operative Framework," *Journal of Consumer Culture* (2016): 1–19.

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