Fanfiction Rules Writing Research

GARRETT JONES

Produced in Adele Richardson's ENC 1102

Introduction

Out of all writing hobbies, fanfiction seems to be one of the more popular ones among adolescents. It's simple to pick up, the characters and settings are premade, and it's only as difficult as the author makes it to be. If given a choice on a topic to write, more students would rather write fanfiction, or at least a narrative, than do a research paper. However, writing fanfiction is much more complicated than it looks because it takes learning how to write and performing research to make a half decent story. Coming from personal experience in writing fanfiction, I know what it takes to create a story.

Fanfictions are creative pieces of writing created by fans based off the plot lines and characters from a "canon" of certain works. From video games, Japanese anime, manga TV shows, and even books; however, it's not limited to just those mediums (Roozen 137, 144; Chandler-Olcott and Mahar 557; Thomas 1-6). Though Kelly Chandler-Olcott and Donna Mahar discuss fanfiction as an adolescent activity, Kevin Roozen's research subject had written fanfiction since she was about eight, meaning that fanfiction is not something just for young adults to toy and play with (143).

Students who read graphic novels or simple print fiction may find themselves intrigued enough to study and try to create their own works of fanfiction because they generate and transform story worlds (Brown 209-13; Hammond 54-6; Thomas 6-10). I have often fantasized different worlds with various scenarios, some of which have been written down since then. Like myself, many students actually prefer to write fiction as they find it "easier" than nonfiction because they can "make things up" more easily without having to use facts and it's more fun, much to teachers' disdain (Newkirk 469).

Getting started on a new piece of work is one of the most difficult tasks of writing, akin to pushing a boulder, but once you get into the writing groove then it becomes much easier and it will develop the author's writing skills (Antoniou and Moriarty 162; Coylar 441-2; Havel 333). Over the past several years, scholars and academics have had more pressure to write because of the wide assumption that they are "naturally able and willing to write" (Antoniou and Moriarty 157-8). Despite this stereotype, some researchers have discovered methods to help bolster writing. Writing is a generative process that creates text that captures thoughts to return to, such as data observations of science research, or peer feedback (Colyar 425-6; Havel 332-3; Guacsh et al. 324-6).

A simple, direct method to ensure student success in writing is a daily writing workshop for five to ten minutes that will help students use literacies and engagements to better their writing later on (Lain 20-3; Roozen 137-8). From an academic standpoint, however, writing is important because it provides a medium for communication and is an important mode of learning, such as scientific research (Havel 330, 333-4).

Apparently, fanfiction is an untapped resource for teachers to use in helping students write and research. I've noticed that while some of the scholars talk about how research is put into different kinds of fiction, why people write fanfiction, and how research and writing are critical for academic and scholars, they don't ever combine them. While some adolescents do write fanfiction, and thus become better at it, others who don't may struggle later on when asked to write academic papers. My research is dedicated to observing how fanfiction can be used to help students write

better and use research elements like the CARS model. This information will be quite useful in helping students learn how to perform research and write academic papers, thus making them more natural writers.

Methods

My question on this topic is how the research and writing process of fanfiction helps students learn about how to perform research for professional or academic purposes (e.g. the CARS model). Of course, this meant I needed to conduct surveys and perform interviews. For my surveys, I asked some general context questions such as how long they had written as an author. After that, I focused my survey questions and asked about participants how much research they had done for their stories. My interviews used a few of these questions along with how fanfiction affected interviewees' writing and research capabilities. In my analysis, I searched for connections between how long participants had written as an author and how much research had been done for stories and academics. To gain a different perspective, I also analyzed the reasons why they wrote fanfiction and why certain fandoms were easier or harder to write for. I categorized the various reasons by which key phrases appeared most often while taking unique responses as well. In addition, I gathered my own experiences in writing fanfiction to examine the writing process. From the interviews, I linked suggestions on teaching strategies that implement fanfiction as a writing tool.

I collected my survey data from a multitude of authors from the two fanfiction sites I roam daily and others that hosted a general variety of fanfiction. Unfortunately, there were some sites that had specific fanfiction, and were unclear how to join or seemed susceptible to viruses or other malware. I realized that I might have lost potential candidates for my data, but I had spread out my survey far enough to compensate for any potential losses. I had planned on using observations to gather data, but as an avid reader of fanfiction myself, I would be a bit biased in the fanfictions of my choosing and not collect appropriate data. In fact, because I am an active member of one of the specific fandom sites, I was able to spread my survey out farther than most of the other sites. Though, that was also because some of the general fanfiction sites had poor communication between authors and groups or the authors simply weren't online during the short time I had my survey made available.

Results

My survey produced quite a few results. Beginning with the authors themselves, about 76% of the participants have been writing fanfiction for two years or less, though 12% have written it for five years or more. In regards to their writing ability, 87% have found that since they started writing, it has become at least twice as easy to write than before. Their fandom participation shows varied results. While 75% of authors are a part of five fandoms or less, the rest of the 25% range from six to over twenty fandoms. Yet the study shows that, despite these vast numbers, about 73% write for one or two of the fandoms, though 10% write for over five of them. Similarly, 55% of authors do not write crossovers (a story in which two or more fandoms overlap) while of those who do, 31% write one or two crossover stories. As for their story research, 55% spend three hours or less researching for their stories while 24% research double that time and 18% research over ten hours. In regards to any prior research experience, 29% performed research in high school while 15% did so in college and another 15% didn't experience research at all. Of those with research experiences, 21% of them contained writing and information gathering.

The authors who wrote stories in terms of personal interpretations of the characters and dialogue ranged at 63% for writing two stories or less, but there were 27% who wrote more than six stories. The stories in terms of pure fantasy (e.g., original character stories, non-canon pairings,

not realistic to canon, etc.) had a similar disparity with 53% writing two or less stories or 27% writing six or more. The reasons why they wrote fanfiction were varied, but the most common reasons were for fun and/or entertainment, ideas that needed to be written down or a creative outlet, practicing their skills in preparation for original fiction, or improving their English. The authors also considered their interest in writing as serious, with 72% of them having a semi-serious leaning towards serious attitude.

The interviewees say that, in general, writing has become easier the more often they performed it, barring writer's block.

As a side question, when asking about the easiest fandom to write for, participants all gave different answers, but I focused on the reasons why they were easy, which were all varied. Some had no answer as they only wrote for one fandom and others said there was "no easiest." Those who did answer said they wrote because they were familiar with the fandom, there was little backstory to the canon thus making it open for interpretation and experimentation, the canon had relatable characters, the canon and its constraints were flexible and adaptable, and because the size of the audience led to potentially low standards.

On the other end of the spectrum, authors listed reasons why certain fandoms were very difficult to write for. Like before, some didn't answer since they only wrote for a singular fandom or saying there was "no hardest." The ones who did answer often said it was because of an inflexible canon, very picky readers, potentially vast amounts of research, they lacked familiarity with the canon, the canon itself is underdeveloped as with its characters, or they lacked the skill and motivation to write.

Discussion

My studies on this topic have yielded very insightful information and answers for my research question. I have also learned quite a bit about fanfiction that didn't pertain to my question and raised new ones.

The interviewees say that, in general, writing has become easier the more often they performed it, barring writer's block. As a group, their time as authors and time spent researching have similar disparities as those in the survey, but also includes factors such as previous knowledge. Their experiences with research projects have been associated with school assignments and writing fanfiction for fun or to express their creativity. Most of them say their research process for fanfiction hasn't affected the academic process or vice-versa, though one says it was the other way around. Nonetheless, their writing has helped them become more engaging when writing nonfiction works. In fact, most of them taught themselves how to write. Upon asking their beliefs on whether students should learn to write fanfiction, all of them said yes, as it helps students learn to be creative and serves as good training for aspiring writers.

Research Process

Research is an important part of writing, being the process of collecting the data necessary for the paper being written. Havel states, "When people decide to write, information about the topic often needs to be collected" (332). In other words, research gives a paper some form of valid information to support an author's claims. In terms of fanfiction, some research is required to keep canon facts accurate or to add factors that require some understanding before writing about them. Diana Hammond realizes that some original fiction often require much more in-depth knowledge on topics such as justice systems and mental disorders (53).

However, according to the results of my survey, there is no correlation between how many hours an author spends researching for his story and if they have participated in a research project

before. The majority of the authors from the survey have performed at least high school level research, meaning that they might not have encountered proper academic research. Coming from personal experience, it is likely they have done the bare minimum, hence why so many spend as little time as possible researching for their stories. It doesn't help that the teaching of research is often isolated in school, and students will quickly forget about the experience once it's over (Hammond 53). As also seen in Hammond's experiment in teaching students how to perform research through fiction, the student writings proved to be very different from fanfiction in that their work had to be original, which required additional research with teacher supervision (54-5).

When asked if their research for fanfiction affected how they performed academic research or vice versa, most of my interviewees have stated "no." They have given their reasons, leaning towards writing with their current knowledge or no need for it aside from confirmation. I can understand this as I have done the same a few times. Be that as it may, one of them did state how academic research positively affected how they performed research for their fanfiction. I believe the reason that the fanfiction research process does not influence the academic aspect is because it's a crash course in learning how to perform research that's filled with trial and error. In the end, it's not the quantity of research performed that affects the story, but the contents that drive it (Hammond 57). In terms of research processes, fanfiction may not affect academics, but the inverse can be true.

Writing Process

On the other hand, the writing process of fanfiction is a very different story. The results of the survey show that despite liking a multitude of fandoms, fanfiction writers often write for a single one. This might be for several reasons, but the point stands that they plan their writing for a given audience. Like academic fields, each fandom has a given audience with their own demographics and expectations. An author has to anticipate these so they can write a story that appeals to readers and can attract interest. These expectations include general knowledge, flow of writing, proper English mechanics, and making connections that have either been done or haven't been seen before. In writing fanfiction, there may be a lot of clichés in a certain fandom that receive a wide range of reactions from amusement to disgust. A common trait between academic papers and fanfiction that is often disregarded is the execution of an idea, because even if it's a horrible idea filled with annoying clichés, it could be overlooked and possibly enjoyed by readers if it's executed well. The idea, execution, and audience's expectations are three major make-or-break points that can make a successful paper or story.

Even though those components are necessary, they only influence the success of the paper. An author needs to take into account the structure of their paper. Any story makes use of a plot, point of view, authorial distance, and characters, and these concepts can be transferred to academic papers (Holley and Colyar 115-7). In a story's plot rests the idea that helps it communicate what the author wants to say, even if it might be complete gibberish to some people. The point of view is often thought of as how the character views the world or how the author narrates, but really it's the lens through which the author communicates an idea. An author narrating a villain might see a deer as weak prey, but as a protagonist or side character, it might be cute or lunch, but it depends on which lens the author wants readers to see it through. Academically, this is a way to present the information to the audience to communicate the idea in a certain light. Authorial distance, in layman's terms, is the location of the narrator. Much like point of view, but in a different range as it conveys whether the narrator tells of each thought and sense of a character as if they were the same person or simply stands on the outside and narrates the events like a radio announcer. Last but not least, the character is the element of the story that runs through the plot to its completion while building up information through actions. On academic papers, the character is the author who starts with the information given and runs with that to build up new information from his or her perspective.

After all the structure of the paper has been set up and a good section is written down, the authors will need feedback from others to ensure the quality of the writing. Feedback for an author is like a navigator for a ship. It helps keep the idea of the paper on course and allows for occasional editorial corrections. In academics, students will usually ask the teacher for feedback, and in fanfiction, authors will often ask their peers. The best feedback to give authors is epistemic as it improves the author's knowledge and their writing performance (Guasch et al. 333). Hence why authors like writing fanfiction—it gives them an audience that provides enough feedback to improve the author's knowledge and inspire them with new ideas to write about.

Some of the feedback can also double as motivational support. I agree with Havel on the fact that getting started on writing is one of the hardest parts, but once momentum is built up, then it keeps the writing flowing (333). It takes a while for me to get into my writing, but once I'm going it's hard to stop. Even after I stop, I still come back to writing the story because I feel obligated to my readers to finish the story that I had started. Fanfictions, barring one-shot stories, can greatly increase how students write by giving them a reason to write. Readers are always hungry for more of a story and, if the author liked writing that story, he or she might choose to continue and practice writing skills in order to write the next chapter better.

Teaching Strategies

Now these results show that, although fanfiction can't provide for the research methods, it can do wonders to the writing process. For starters, comparing how long most of the authors had been writing fanfiction with how easier it was to write since they began shows that writing fanfiction makes it much easier to write generally. Even writing a little bit every day, be it a quick one shot or a rough draft, can make a huge difference in how much easier writing can become, as Sheryl Lain tries to point out (21-3). Thus, fanfiction can be used as a tool to help students write more naturally.

Students could be asked to write original fiction but fanfiction provides an easier alternative to get into the flow of writing. The only catch is that the students should understand the source of a particular fandom (Chandler-Olcott and Mahar 557). As they understand the source, the students are given "transformative powers" and can exert these powers upon a canonical source and bend it to their will and imagination (Thomas 7-9). Fanfiction is also useful as it is a good creative outlet for those exceptionally imaginative and great training grounds for those who desire to become authors. Moreover, it provides practice in writing skills and can help improve students' English through usage of vocabulary, even if they are native speakers of the language.

What makes it even more useful as a tool is that, depending on the fandom, the setting and characters are already provided and so the students can use them or add their own characters. These characters may be relatable in certain ways to some students, thus making it somewhat easier to write about. Some fandoms are flexible and open to a lot of interpretation which gives students plenty of room to work around in when they write. If there is little to no backstory, then students can create their own if necessary. However, there are some drawbacks to using certain fandoms. Some canons can be quite inflexible and some of the ones that aren't may require a lot of research, which is very off-putting for beginners. Canon that isn't very well developed also affects how feasible it is to write fanfiction. New writers might encounter picky readers, repeated/cliche ideas, and a large existing body of fanfiction, which might lead them to realize their lack of skill and lose their motivation to write.

Conclusion

Fanfiction is a useful tool that can help students improve their writing capabilities, if not their research abilities. It is a relatively simple writing experience that is already halfway done for the author, who just needs to make the right connections and write the fanfiction. Teachers should

implement this material when teaching about writing to improve the student's skills, if not to keep them engaged in class. There is still much more work to be done in this area. In my findings, I noticed some unique disparities in how many stories were written out of a certain canon or pure fantasy. I also noticed a significant amount of authors who wrote their stories as a way to escape reality, implying a possible psychological mindset among authors. Regardless, fanfiction is an underrated method to improving the writing skills of students in order to prepare them for academic writing.

Works Cited

Antoniou, Maria, and Jessica Moriarty. "What Can Academic Writers Learn from Creative Writers? Developing Guidance and Support for Lecturers in Higher Education." *Teaching in Higher Education* 13.2 (2008): 157-167. *ERIC*. Web. 25 Feb. 2014.

Chandler-Olcott, Kelly, and Donna Mahar. "Adolescents' Anime-inspired 'Fanfictions': An Exploration of Multiliteracies." *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* 46.7 (2003): 556-66. *Academic Search Premier.* Web. 19 Feb. 2014.

Colyar, Julia. "Becoming Writing, Becoming Writers." *Qualtiative Inquiry.* 15.2 (2009): 421-436. *ERIC.* Web. 19 Feb. 2014.

Guasch, T, et al. "Effects of Feedback on Collaborative Writing in an Online Learning Environment." *Distance Education* 34.3 (n.d.): 324-338. *Social Sciences Citation Index*. Web. 25 Feb. 2014.

Hammond, Diana. "Fact 'And' Fiction: Modeling the Research Practices of Fiction Writers." *English Journal.* 98.3 (2009): 53-58. *ERIC.* Web. 19 Feb. 2014.

Havel, P.D. "Assignments: An Important Means of Learning Subject Matter & the Writing Process." *American Biology Teacher* 57.6 (1995): 330-35. *ERIC.* Web. 25 Feb. 2014.

Holley, Karri, and Julia Colyar. "Under Construction: How Narrative Elements Shape Qualitative Research." *Theory into Practice* 51.2 (2012): 114-121. *ERIC.* Web. 19 Feb. 2014.

Lain, Sheryl. "Reaffirming the Writing Workshop for Young Adolescents." *Voices from the Middle* 14.3 (2007): *Academic OneFile*. Web. 25 Feb. 2014.

Newkirk, Thomas. "The Revolt against Realism: The Attraction of Fiction for Young Writers." *The Elementary School Journal* 101.4 (2001): 465-77. *JSTOR*. Web. 25 Feb. 2014.

Roozen, Kevin. "'Fan Fic-ing' English Studies: A Case Study Exploring the Interplay of Vernacular Literacies and Disciplinary Engagement." *Research In The Teaching Of English 2* (2009): 136. *JSTOR*. Web. 25 Feb. 2014.

Thomas, Bronwen. "What Is Fanfiction and Why Are People Saying Such Nice Things about It?" *Storyworlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies* 3 (2011): 1-24. *Project MUSE*. Web. 25 Feb. 2014.

Garrett Jones

Garrett Jones is a sophomore majoring in Aerospace Engineering and minoring in Creative Writing. He is a LEAD scholar and a member of the EXCEL program. He's interested in helping to build and shape the future, including possibly helping with the further development of space exploration or building a lunar base as well as writing a young adult series of novels.