SCAFFOLDING CREATIVITY: FANFICTION WRITING IN THE IEP CLASSROOM

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If you ask IEP students to write a 2-page paper, how long is their paper likely to be?

What if...
- They wrote 10 pages when you asked for 2?
- They included original poetry?
- They invented a language that they used in their paper?
- They connected themes from what you were discussing in class to their own culture?
- They used metaphors, similes, and extensive descriptions?
- They were creative and came up with unique ideas?
“All I know is you took me from home. Actually, I had no choice because you convinced me that I was a big burden to my parents. You persuaded me. My no would kill all humanity. Here, you have isolated me, humiliated me, tortured me. You just forgot that I am only a child. We are all children and you destroyed our lives! How do you think we will survive after that? We do not fit in any society, we will be excluded for the rest of our lives. We will continue to suffer forever. Would you do this to a son of yours? Tell me! Would you?”

~ “Awaken”

“Ender needed time to breath, to take a break from battle school. He felt a squeeze in his chest almost as if someone was quitting his breathing. Graff and the teachers were doing it. Ender has been treated as a puppet. They extracted all his feelings and left his body with him, who kept him alive.”

~“The Machu Picchu Adventure”
What is Fanfiction?

• “Fiction written by fans about preexisting plots, characters, and/or settings from their favorite media” (Black, 2008, p. 10)

• Can be based on books, movies, TV shows, video games, comic strips, real people, etc.

• Extends a story or fills in gaps

• Areas of engagement: reading, writing, and reviewing fanfics
The Online Connection

- Fanfiction, although it doesn’t have to be, is most widely disseminated online
- Two major sites are Fanfiction.net (FFN) and Archive Of Our Own (AO3)
- Many, many other blogs, forums, and websites are dedicated to fanfiction—some for a specific fandom (or pairing), some for multiple fandoms
So what does this mean for ESL instructors?

- Most research on fanfiction has not been in terms of L2 acquisition
  - Media studies (Jenkins, 1992)
  - Gender studies (Driscoll, 2006)
  - Copyright issues (Tushnet, 2007)
  - L1 literacy development (Chandler-Olcott & Mahar, 2003)
- The majority of work on fanfiction and L2 learners has been conducted by Black (2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009)
  - Out-of-classroom context
  - How L2 fanfic writers position themselves (novices vs. experienced writers)
  - How feedback on grammar is given by reviewers
Fanfiction in the Language Classroom

- Behrenwald (2012) chapter/presentation for CALICO on potential uses
  - Scaffolding and modeling*
  - Beta readers (peer editing)+
  - Collaborative writing
  - Authentic language and cultural knowledge*
  - Motivation*
  - Digital literacy+

- A follow-up to this (Hatfield, 2014) showed evidence of all of these benefits except collaborative writing, which had not been attempted due to programmatic constraints

- Sauro (2014) used various fanfiction practices as technology-based tasks in an EFL classroom in order to improve both language skills and digital literacy
Scaffolding

- **Vygotsky’s (1978) Zone of Proximal Development:** learners can accomplish more in a guided framework than alone; fanfiction provides characters and setting for writers to experiment with

- **Other writers:** novice writers may model their work after more experienced writers in the fandom
“What fan fiction offers to these young writers is a great, existing story line: interesting, three-dimensional characters that have already been developed; and a wealth of back story both to pull from and write about. The inexperienced author doesn’t have to spend all his or her time developing something original, but instead can focus on the actual skill of writing. In other words, fan fiction is like training wheels for writers.” (Lewis, 2004, n.p.)
Using Fanfiction in the ESL Classroom

- Elective course for bridge-level students entitled “Reading and Writing about Literature”
- Met 1 hour a day, 4 days per week
- Over 15 weeks, students read 2 novels and completed 3 major writing assignments—a personal narrative, an academic essay, and a work of fanfiction based on the book we were reading

- *The Hobbit* by JRR Tolkien
- *Ender’s Game* by Orson Scott Card
- *Johnny Tremain* by Esther Forbes
The Set-Up

- Students were initially apprehensive—extensive scaffolding was necessary
- Started out with a guest lecture from a PhD student in the English department
- Students were required to read several fanfics that I had selected from FFN and AO3
  - A dwarf-woman’s perspective in *The Hobbit*
  - Peter’s point of view in *Ender’s Game*
  - What happened after the American Revolution for the characters of *Johnny Tremain*
- We went over a worksheet on 6 basic principles of narrative, particularly focusing on internal vs. external conflict
The Assignment

• 2 double-spaced pages of fanfiction based on the novel we were currently reading
  • Either one complete story or a series of related drabbles (100-word stories)
  • Fanart could be included, but 2 pages of writing were required
• Suggestions were given to help the students brainstorm
  • Tell part of the story from the viewpoint of a different character
  • What’s going to happen next?
  • What happened before the story?
  • What if the main character was the opposite gender?
  • What if this story was set in your country?
The Beta-Reading

• The concept was introduced at the beginning of the project
• First draft was paper-based with student-directed areas for specific feedback from a partner
• Second draft was posted on a forum on Moodle; students had a week to read all of their classmates’ stories and give feedback
• The final drafts were submitted to me several days afterwards
The Results

- For the most part, students produced high-quality, creative pieces of writing
- Love stories (Love interests found for Bilbo, Gandalf, Ender, Bonzo, etc.)
- Alternate endings (Johnny doesn’t injure his hand; the Buggers win)
- Unsympathetic characters redeemed or explained (Peter and Bonzo in Enter’s Game)
- Cross-cultural connections (*The Monkey’s Tale* + *The Hobbit*, Sheik Bilbo Baggins, Ender at Machu Pichu, Johnny Tremain traveling to 18th century Brazil)
- Use of “extra” creative elements (poetry, invented languages, flashbacks, descriptions, etc.)
Benefits

• Students put a lot of time, energy, and creativity into their fics.
• General apprehension about writing fiction seemed to be alleviated by the scaffolding provided.
• No evidence of plagiarism found.
• At least two students rewrote their stories to remove the fanfic references and submitted them to our IEP’s student-run literary magazine.
• A lot of pride from the students—most of them had never written fiction before.
Challenges

- Assessment
  - Looked at with disfavor by earlier researchers
  - Program constraints required it
  - Developed basic rubric (organization, content, language/vocabulary, grammar & spelling/punctuation)—no complaints so far!

- Unmotivated students
  - Only one instance of this so far; scaffolding seems to be extremely helpful

- Adult content and themes
  - What is the role of erotica or bloody violence in an intensive English program?
  - Disclaimer: “Your classmates will be reading your story. We all come from different backgrounds and have different comfort levels. Please be respectful of other people and do not use excessive profanity, gratuitous violence, or explicit sexual references in your story.”
Looking Ahead...

• More engagement with preexisting fandoms online
• Film/TV-inspired stories, as opposed to text-inspired ones
• Possibility for use in foreign language classrooms
• Not necessarily trying to prepare students for future academic study in the target language, so there is more of a possibility to focus on content and culture, rather than academic skills
Now it’s your turn!

- Small groups (4-6 people), based on your familiarity with one of the following popular books/movies/TV shows:
  - Harry Potter
  - Lord of the Rings
  - The Big Bang Theory
  - Frozen
  - Breaking Bad
  - The Cat in the Hat
  - Sherlock Holmes (book, movies, or TV show)
- Imagine that YOU need to write a short piece of fanfiction for a class.
- You have 7-10 minutes to brainstorm plots and ideas for a hypothetical story—be creative!
- For the last few minutes of our session, you will share your ideas with the larger group.
THANK YOU! QUESTIONS?

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Images taken from:

- http://seoulbeats.com/2014/04/quintessential-k-pop-fanfiction/
- http://buffynfaith.net/links.html
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