

# I Love Your Book, but I Love My Version More:

## Fanfiction in the English Language Arts Classroom

**A**t midnight on August 2, 2008, the final installment of Stephenie Meyer's Twilight Series, *Breaking Dawn*, hit bookstore shelves across the globe. But, regardless of whether Bella would chose Jacob Black or Edward Cullen as her final paramour, or whether she would become a vampire or remain mortal in Meyer's grand finale, millions of children and teens had already finished the novel. For months they had been formulating extensions of Bella's story—alternative narratives, new twists, and their own endings. Many of them, after finishing the final book . . . again . . . pressed their computers' power buttons, connected to the Internet, navigated to their favorite websites, and began typing their own versions of what might have happened or what they hoped would happen to bring the series to its conclusion. They returned to what has become a favorite literary destination for so many young people: fan fiction, or fanfic.

Fan fiction is just what the name implies: it is fiction written by fans, often teenagers, of novels, movies, television, or other media. This fiction is based in the worlds created by the authors, but young fans extend, elaborate, or appropriate the text for their own purposes. Fanfics come in many different recognized genres, and some innovative, even multimodal forms, as well. The world of fan fiction is inhabited by a community of authors and readers, where critics argue that the point of intersection between reader and text is the only true place where the work "exists" (Keeseey 128). English language arts teachers can tap into this community and intersection to engage learners on their own virtual turf. Although fan fiction can

be written about a vast array of popular and classic novels, the fiction arising from the wildly popular Twilight series by Stephenie Meyer works especially well for introducing how this genre can be used in the classroom. Beware, "spoilers" for the Twilight series are necessary to best illuminate this sensation.

### The Language of Literature

A glance at the popular Internet site fanfiction.net hints at the popularity of the fan fiction phenomenon. For the Twilight series alone, there are 68,824 fan fiction titles listed, second only to the Harry Potter series, which has a staggering 362,364 fanfics on this one site alone! There are fics associated with diverse books ranging from *Wuthering Heights*, to *Romeo and Juliet*, to *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, to *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*. Despite the diversity and sheer volume of fics, there is surprising conformity to the standard conventions of writing and use of the literary terminology.

Authors of fan fiction, many of whom are young adult readers, take their work seriously and have adopted the language of literature to discuss and describe their own fiction. Authors categorize their work by "genre," separate it by "chapters" and "sequels," and ask for "reviews." Fan written stories that are considered out of alignment in style, characterization, or plot development compared to the inspirational text are described as failing to be "canon." While these authors use previously extant recognized language with newly understood meanings, they also create new terms, such as "song fic" to describe a piece that is

organized around song lyrics. Internet slang words are a part of the conversation as well, such as “flaming,” a verb that describes an angry remark or review of a piece of writing. Participants join online communities or create their own, and most fanfics and fanfic sites begin with a disclaimer that the author does not own the characters or the situations, and that contributors are only “borrowing” them. Some young writers have actually crafted rules for writing a fanfic, such as “The Twilight Fanfiction Etiquette” ([http://www.fanfiction.net/s/3626338/1/Twilight\\_Fanfiction\\_Etiquette](http://www.fanfiction.net/s/3626338/1/Twilight_Fanfiction_Etiquette)). These teens and young adult writers are developing online communities and emerging in various roles devoid of the adult gaze, and they are policing themselves. Not only do they seamlessly structure their own roles, but they also appropriate real world signifiers.

Finding a way to get students to enjoy reading and to respond to literature spontaneously and personally is the holy grail of the language arts educator. Fan fiction provides evidence that young people can not only read and respond to literature, and do

so voluntarily, but can also craft their responses in sophisticated, polished writing. These young adult writers create a subjective, fluid interpretation of the readings and subsequently write at the highest cognitive levels of Bloom’s Taxonomy. Their writing exhibits complex interactions with text and the ability to judge, predict, and apply their understandings. In addition to exhibiting in-depth literary analysis, these authors are also engaging in the

creation of extensive written works and incorporating the writing process through the use of critique and revision. When they purposefully apply their reading and demonstrate an understanding and engagement with the text, they reflectively act through their composition of fan fiction. Cope and Kalantzis (1999) agree, “When learners juxtapose different languages, discourses, styles, and approaches, they gain substan-

tively in metacognitive and metalinguistic abilities and in their ability to reflect critically on complex systems and their interactions” (15).

Through fanfics, today’s youth are not only more effectively engaging with texts they enjoy, but they are also repetitively recognizing and using archetypes and motifs that have been utilized in canonical literature for centuries. The recent adoration for Stephenie Meyer’s work extends beyond mere enjoyment of contemporary young adult vampire and werewolf novels; it moves readers toward an understanding of literary concepts, helps define what constitutes “canonical,” and reminds *us* that these elements are “worthy” of time and attention in our schools. Rather than these concepts being presented by licensed educators, however, written responses from teen readers about their favorite works and their relationships to each others’ stories are generating a new online learning tool and school of criticism.

## The Structure of Fanfic

Historically, rhetorical approaches to literature focused singularly on the formal arrangement of the writing itself. It was not until around 1925 that I. A. Richards began to examine the affectiveness of literature, and we began to see the very rudimentary origins of Reader-Response Theory, which is founded on the understanding that “readers need to learn to read and interpret literature for themselves and to make meaning of their reading themselves. Doing so results in true engagement” (Blasingame 29). Internet fan fiction is an exciting manifestation of this engagement. Readers engage with the text by extending the author’s narrative, elaborating on it, or combining various works into a single creative narrative or “crossover” by appropriating characters, building curricular connections, and developing multimodal compositions based on the original narratives. For example, a crossover author might combine characters and/or plot details from Star Trek with Harry Potter, thus attempting the creation of a harmonious balance between and among worlds birthed by popular authors, worlds to which they can relate and respond. Entire websites are dedicated to crossover fan fiction, such as <http://community.livejournal.com/crossoverfic>, where “Anything is welcome . . . , any fandom, the only requirements are that all stories are crossovers” (Crossover, par 1). On

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this website, stories can be found combining imaginary worlds from movies, books, television programs, comic books, and mythology, if not more.

Fanfics often expand upon an author's story or, in some cases, fill in empty spaces in a story, such as "The Murder of Bella's Heart," a fanfic that elaborates upon the moments in *New Moon* (book two in the Twilight series) immediately following Edward's departure and Bella's rescue from the woods where he left her (Poplikeapop-trt3). In the original book, these moments are absent, replaced by blank pages that represent time passing. In the fanfic, the author speculates on Bella's thoughts and feelings as they might have appeared on those blank pages.

Readers of various genres and works of literature synthesize their reading and the effect characters have on them. This juxtaposition becomes evident in crossover stories that combine characters and settings from two more sources into one fanfic. These complex pieces explore what the implications might be if characters from different works were to meet in the same text, or the effect of a character from one work having to deal with the circumstances of another work. In "Abandon All Hope You Who Enter Here," the fanfic writer explores just what might happen if the soul of Meyer's beloved protagonist, Edward Cullen, were, in fact, damned as he fears and he were sent to Dante's Inferno. Consider the following excerpt:

Hell hath known no limits to keep me bound here and yet I am captured like the proverbial Virgil through each level I have passed, far beyond the gluttons and the sodomites. I am farther down than where liars dwell. In so many ways I was undead and then to top off the pain I stand with the traitors for denying and turning my back on her. My angel has dimed [sic] hopefully alive where I left her. Trapped in my iced containment I am left to think, to suffer, to reminisce about the last century or so of my life. (Andy Iron)

This insightful story exhibits the author's understanding not only of the characterization of Meyer's Edward, but also of the elaborate structure of Dante's Hell. The author had to decide which level of the In-

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ferno Edward would inhabit based on what Edward himself believed to be his greatest sin. Other examples of Twilight crossover fics include crossovers with *Romeo and Juliet* and "Thanatopsis," both illustrating an equally deep engagement with the classics as well as with Meyer's work.

Often fanfics maintain the major elements of the primary source (in this case, one of the Twilight books) but change or add to a main character in some significant way. These appropriations often make the character more "real" to the fan author. In "Scared," Bella's move to live with her father in

Forks, Washington, is explained by changing her back story (Lon-Dubh). This fic posits that Bella's stepfather was abusive. The fanfic also uses the abuse to explain parts of Bella's character, such as her love of reading and her apparent clumsiness. Further, Bella's reluctance to see herself as beautiful is explained by a prior date-rape trauma. In this fanfic, Bella's character has very real problems beyond Meyer's vampires and werewolves, enabling the story's author and readers to engage with real world problems through the safe outlets of reading and writing. In a sense, fanfics can help their young writers to escape and heal; their responses to these fantasy worlds are ways to communicate their own difficult realities to others.

In a more positive manner, other fanfics make exciting connections across different curriculum content areas. In "Triangles with Linear Qualities," a fan author explores the love triangle of Bella, Edward, and Jacob through the use of geometry, organizing the narrative around mathematical properties and using the language of mathematics to explain the complexity of the characters' relationships:

1. Any two points can be connected by a straight line.
2. The distance between La Push and Forks has never seemed shorter.
3. Given any straight line segment, a circle can be drawn having the segment as radius and one endpoint as center.

Bella is the center of everything. Always. (La-La)

This creative response acts as an elaborate analysis of the relationships Meyer sets up in her novels, but it also examines a cross-curricular response where the young writer combines literature and mathematics to better understand both.

### **Beyond Linear Narratives**

Not all fanfics need to be written. The definition of “composition” is evolving in our technology-heavy world. The working definition of composition is no longer limited to informal or formal writing meant to be read; today’s teens have broadened that defini-

tion to encompass not only print narrative, but also visual narrative—photos, drawings, graphic art, and video. Maxine Greene (1995) suggests that multimodal demonstrations encourage young adult readers to think alternatively about the worlds of literature. For instance, “fanart” includes such visual creations as drawings, paintings, and computer-generated images centered on sources, much as fanfics are written pieces centered on sources. Talented artists render visual interpretations of the texts that illustrate their engagement with the

literature. Meyer herself has a section on her professional website where she has pictures of covers that were not used for her series (“Other Novels—Crap-tastic Covers”). Visual responses to the written work enhance the cognitive response to reading. In other words, by adapting and extending the written work, young adult readers discover new ways to make meaning of their reading.

“Song fics” are another example of multimodal composition that incorporate two or more medium into the fic. A recognized genre among fanfiction writers, song fics organize the story around song lyrics that tie to the theme of the piece. A work of fiction such as “100 Years” (TwiLigHtDancEr93) uses song

lyrics from the musical group Five for Fighting’s song “100 Years,” explicating and elaborating on the source text by drawing parallels between the story theme and the lyrics. Meyer herself provides playlists on her website for each of her novels, supporting the connection between music and books.

Although the original works upon which fanfiction is based are most often books or movies, the forms used in responses crafted by readers are limited only by their creativity and imagination.

### **Techno-literacy of Emerging Writing Communities**

K–12 students in the 21st century do not remember a time when life did not include the possibilities provided online, and the current generation’s techno-literacy evolves virally. While many adults remain uncomfortable or suspicious of the Internet, many young people find the cyber universe to be the space where they are most comfortable expressing themselves personally, as well as artistically, and may even be the safest place they know. They have maneuvered their interests and education outside the walls of the traditional classroom and engaged with their own pedagogical processes, which evolved naturally for them online. Young adult readers are mouse clicks away from massive amounts of information, much of which is created by their peers, including the fanfics written by young avid readers such as themselves. In this way, they are contributing to and participating in a form of collective intelligence. For today’s “Net Gener,” a term coined to describe youth who grew up online, new bilateral interaction with literature offers an outlet through which they can respond critically to both the authors they read and the literary characters they love (Barnes, Marateo, and Ferris 2007). Moreover, they can respond to one another in online communities that emerge around their passion for these narratives.

While there are thousands of sites based on fanfiction, teens have discovered one powerful and free online tool for use with their writing: wikis, derived from the Hawaiian word for “quick.” Wikis (such as the simple one we set up at <http://fanwriting.wet-paint.com>) are quick to start, so the readers can build their own online narratives. Other fans can collaborate on these wikis, change portions, edit, or add to these compositions by creating their own free accounts.

The stigma educators associate with sites like

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Wikipedia and the nature of the “quick” and easy editing by anyone with an account is disregarded by fan writers. They feel perfectly comfortable participating in collective intelligence, where peers gather to generate the extensions of their own readings and knowledge. Free wikis are completely editable by any member, though permissions can be set to allow full or limited access.

## Applying Fan Writing in the 21st Century Classroom

As teachers, we must educate ourselves about the value of technology and the collective intelligences in our language arts classrooms. No longer can we perpetuate Luddite fears about the lack of regulations controlling the Internet compared to the strictly regulated environment of a library. Instead of fearing and focusing on negative ramifications surrounding online pedagogy, we must encourage smart online presences for our students of all ages. Even though many schools focus primarily on content, some educational programs are moving toward a concept-based approach to educating that supports teachers who move away from teaching content only in their own disciplines. We must develop curriculum that addresses today’s techno-savvy students’ bidirectional relationships with technology. The freedom of information and fan writers’ willingness to draw from the vast resources of the Internet provide an opportunity for educators to broaden curriculum to include lessons on source evaluation and reliability, as well as emerging research methods that today’s students will surely need. Utilizing the growing number of online tools allows teachers to assess intangible aspects of learning, such as engagement and process.

As previously mentioned, there are numerous websites that publish fanfiction, and these tend to monitor themselves through system administrators. We suggest teachers who want to set up their own sites begin with smaller networks where the teacher still retains some control. For example, we have been using online discussion boards in the classroom for years. We have noticed with some bewilderment that when the online writing was assessed, students completed only the bare minimum, if they wrote at all. However, after creating a section called “This & That,” where students could discuss anything appropriate

without grades, the board quickly filled with posts, writings, responses, and students building communities that extended online. Now we include such a section on every site we create.

Young adults want to have agency over their own learning. They want less monitoring and no reductionist assessment. We find that the less monitored they feel and the less pressured they feel to create mandatory pieces online, the more they do it. During the 2007–2008 school year, we used a discussion board set up through Google Docs for our AP Language class. This site was barely monitored, left mostly in the hands of the students, and it flourished. A few times, someone wrote something inappropriate, and within minutes other students began emailing the teacher to remove the offending posts. Students monitor one another and learn from one another, especially when the pedagogy is packaged as anything but schooling. As Michael Wesch, founder of Kansas State’s Digital Ethnography project, claims, students love to learn; they just hate school.

As educators, we need to build more online outlets for young readers through which they can respond and collaborate on their readings. We have created and used multiple wikis with our classes and found this to be easy and effective. These sites work especially well for cooperative learning because of the true collaborative nature of the wiki platform. Writers have access to respond simply through a comment thread below each page, or they can actually edit the pages themselves. This open forum requires that a moderator or the owner (usually the teacher) make all members moderators through an open or closed system. Two of the more popular free wiki builders are WikiSpaces (<http://www.wikispaces.com>) and Wetpaint Wiki (<http://www.wetpaint.com>); on many free online platforms, advertising pays for the site. In Wetpaint, if the owner can prove the site is educational in nature, moderators will remove the ads.

Moreover, tech-savvy educators who own their

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own server space can set up discussion boards. While these differ from wikis, in that writers cannot collaborate and actually edit, change, or add to other people's writing directly, writers can thread discussions more easily. One of the more robust discussion boards, or bulletin boards as they are sometimes called, is PhpBB. Educators can check with host services like GoDaddy.com or HostGator.com to easily set up these bulletin boards for their classes. We built one of these bulletin boards for one of our classes, and within the first week, student writers posted more than 1,000 messages to one another in response to their reading and work.

A third free platform worth mentioning is Google Apps. Google is not merely a search engine; it also

has an impressive suite of applications that include, in part: Google Scholar (<http://scholar.google.com>) to access online research articles; Google Books (<http://books.google.com>) to access online books; Google calendar (<http://calendar.google.com>), where educators can build course calendars to share with their students; and Google Docs (<http://docs.google.com>), which we

have consequently used to collaborate on this article. Google Docs is a free online word processor where users can simultaneously collaborate on documents, spreadsheets, and presentations. This tool can eliminate the paper trail as educators "share" files with an unlimited number of students. Fanfic writers can use Google Docs much the way they use a wiki, although to access the fanfics written in Google Docs (but not published online through Google), viewers need to be invited by the owner. This procedure essentially makes it impossible to collaborate with people the writers don't know.

Educators can use the three above tools to tap into the creativity of our 21st century youth by extending their writing classrooms onto the Internet. While some students balk at teachers having Facebook accounts or "lurking" on sites like Fanfiction.

net, others love having instructors whose teaching methods feel familiar and comfortable. We assert that when educators are developing these online platforms for their students, it is important to set up norms and expectations early. Once in use, though, they should step back and allow the students to develop their own threads, their own collaborations, and their own communication through the systems. Though largely invisible to students, they will be able to access not just student products, but also student *processes* through revision histories; these processes not only support students' creative responses to literature, it also holds them more accountable through their digital footprints.

### **Helpful Tools**

#### Online Word Processing

Google Docs - <http://docs.google.com>

Zoho Writer - <http://zoho.com/>

#### Free Online Wikis

Wetpaint Wikis - <http://www.wetpaint.com/>

Wiki Spaces - <http://www.wikispaces.com/>

#### FanFiction Sites

Fan Fiction - <http://www.fanfiction.net/>

Harry Potter Fan Fiction - <http://fanfiction.mugglenet.com/>

Lord of the Rings fan fiction - <http://www.lotrfanfiction.com/>

#### Stephenie Meyer Links

Home Page- <http://www.stepheniemeyer.com/>

Fan Site- <http://www.twilightlexicon.com>

Fan fiction and Fan art- <http://www.rambling-sandthoughts.com/twilight/>

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## Search for New Editor of Language Arts

NCTE is seeking a new editor of *Language Arts*. In July 2011, the term of the present editors (Patricia Enciso, Laurie Katz, Barbara Z. Kiefer, Detra Price-Dennis, and Melissa Wilson) will end. Interested persons should send a letter of application to be received **no later than August 7, 2009**. Letters should include the applicant's vision for the journal and be accompanied by the applicant's vita, one sample of published writing, and two letters of general support from appropriate administrators at the applicant's institution. Do not send books, monographs, or other materials that cannot be easily copied for the Search Committee. Classroom teachers are both eligible and encouraged to apply. The applicant appointed by the NCTE Executive Committee will effect a transition, preparing for his or her first issue in September 2011. The appointment is for five years. Applications should be addressed to Kurt Austin, *Language Arts* Search Committee, NCTE, 1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801-1096. Questions regarding any aspect of the editorship should be directed to Kurt Austin, Publications Division Director: [kaustin@ncte.org](mailto:kaustin@ncte.org); (800) 369-6283, extension 3619.

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