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Editorial

*Education Inquiry* is a new international online, peer-reviewed journal with free access in the field of Educational Sciences and Teacher Education. It is published by the Umeå School of Education, Umeå University, Sweden and is issued four times per year (March, June, September, December). It pursues original empirical and theoretical studies from a wide variety of academic disciplines. The new journal will hopefully fulfil our ambitious expectations as regards publishing interesting and important research from different national contexts. It is our ambition to make it international in that sense. Also, as the name of the journal suggests, one of its aims is to challenge established conventions and taken-for-granted perceptions within these fields. *Education Inquiry* welcomes research from a variety of methodological and theoretical approaches, and invites studies that make the nature and use of educational research the subject of inquiry. Comparative and country-specific studies are also welcome. *Education Inquiry* readers include educators, researchers, teachers and policy-makers in various cultural contexts.

The journal has been established in a period of time when education systems are undergoing radical changes all over the world. Big and strong policy actors in this connection are the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, the United Nations, UNESCO, the World Bank and, from the European horizon, of course also the European Union. What unites the development and proposals that are being brought forward is a logic based on neo-liberal and market-oriented ideas. The guiding principle is competition and surveillance. The Programme for International Student Assessment which today, according to its own statement, covers 90 percent of the world’s economies has now become a hegemonic enterprise as regards the reform of national education systems in terms of more external examinations and more privatised options. Neo-liberalism and a market orientation also have an impact on higher education, where excellence research, external research funding on a competitive basis, research efforts evaluated in terms of impact and international publication are mantras constantly being repeated. Several articles in this issue of *Education Inquiry* deal with different aspects of this fact.

We are pleased to be able to present articles from Australia, Scotland, the USA and Sweden in this first issue of *Education Inquiry*. Linda Croxford’s article “Tensions between the Equity and Efficiency of Schooling: the Case of Scotland” shows, on the basis of two recently completed research projects in Scotland, “how pressures for continuous improvement in attainment lead to practices that exacerbate inequalities”. In the article “A Critique of Instructional Objectives”, James McKernan argues that the ‘objectives model’ of curriculum planning predicted upon behavioural performances has become the dominant form in Europe and elsewhere in the world. In his article he argues that the objectives model is satisfactory for training or instruction, but not when applied to a true sense of ‘education’. Cole & Hager’s article “Learning-practice:
The Ghosts in the Education Machine” discusses, on the basis of theoreticians and philosophers such as Ryle, Wittgenstein, Deleuze & Guattari and Dreyfus & Dreyfus that, no matter how thoroughly and precisely one tries to put into words and describe a teaching situation, there is always “an element missing in the teacher's account”, which in the article is called “the ghosts in the education machine” and which can be attributed to the complexity, multiplicity and variation in every teaching context. The fourth and last article in this issue, Christina Olin-Scheller’s “Literary Prosumers – Young People’s Reading and Writing in a New Media Landscape”, focuses on another international phenomenon, namely the digital media society that has in many different ways changed the prerequisites for teaching and learning. With examples taken from different types of fan culture, she shows that culture is a matter of ‘user generated content’ and that young people in that sense are vital participants as ‘pro-sumers’. In these contexts patterns for learning are being developed that can also be used in an educational context.

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Literary Prosumers: Young People’s Reading and Writing in a New Media Landscape

Christina Olin-Scheller* and Patrik Wikström**

Abstract
The production of culture is today a matter of ‘user generated content’ and young people are vital participants as ‘prosumers’, i.e. both producers and consumers, of cultural products. Among other things, they are busy creating fan works (stories, pictures, films) based on already published material. Using the genre fan fiction as a point of departure, this article explores the drivers behind net communities organised around fan culture and argues that fan fiction sites can in many aspects be regarded as informal learning settings. By turning to the rhetoric principle of *imitatio*, the article shows how in the collective interactive processes between readers and writers such fans develop literacies and construct gendered identities.

Keywords
fan fiction, informal learning settings, literacy, prosumer, rhetoric principle of *imitatio*, literature

Literary Prosumers: Young people’s reading and writing in a new media landscape

The aim of this article is to discuss and problematise some aspects of learning in today’s media landscape. In this landscape the production of culture is a matter of ‘user generated content’ and young people are vital participants as ‘prosumers’, i.e. both producers and consumers of cultural products (Jenkins 1992; Tapscott 1996; Herman et al. 2006). Among other things, they are busy creating fan works (stories, pictures, films) based on already published material. It is especially books about Harry Potter, Japanese manga- and animé stories or films like Pirates of the Caribbean and Star Wars that form the basis for extended narration (Jenkins 1992; Hellekson & Busse 2006; Parrish 2007; Olin-Scheller & Wikström forthcoming). These fan works are not only examples of cultural products, but they also offer their creators ample opportunity to socialise with friends and gain new knowledge.

The role of the prosumer must also be seen both in relation to how digital technology has changed the conditions for cultural production, and to the digital gap between...
‘digital natives’ and ‘digital immigrants’ (Prensky 2006). The digital natives have developed Internet-based skills and competencies without taking a detour around older analogue technologies. Their competencies differ radically from the digital immigrants who were not born in the digital world but gained their digital media skills later in life.

At school, digital natives (mostly students) and digital immigrants (mostly teachers) are supposed to work and function together. Thus, awareness of the changing media landscape and the role of the prosumer is necessary to bridge the gap between generations. It is also vital for understanding the new conditions and frameworks regarding learning in and outside school. In this article we explore learning processes connected to being a contributor to fan fiction sites and examine the conditions for young prosumers’ production of literature.

**Participatory culture, fan culture and fan fiction**

The phenomenon whereby the audience not only passively consumes culture but also contributes to the production of that culture is often referred to as *participatory culture* (Jenkins 2008). Today, participatory culture is a major constituent of online audiences’ behaviour and characterises most online communities. These online communities are informal learning settings consisting of ‘affinity spaces’ where opportunities to learn are powerful and significant (Gee 2004). The communities facilitate the creation and sharing of products which then fosters a strong feeling of affinity between the members.

Further, it should be noted that in many online communities the contributors have the freedom to individually decide how they want to contribute and participate in the community, depending on their interests and ability. Lastly, in most online communities a structure of mentors and disciples emerges which supports the structures for informal learning.

All of these processes are evident in the genre of fan fiction. Fan fiction involves stories based on already published works. The genre is strongly linked to fan culture and is usually produced by fans themselves without any commercial purpose. In fan fiction the original settings and characters are moved into other contexts where new stories are created. It is also common that the contributors develop relationships between characters from different works and usually the stories are based on romantic pairings between two persons. The writers of fan fiction make their texts available to various web communities where readers across the world interact with the authors and comment on and influence the stories (e.g. www.fanfiction.net). The stories can also be linked to other fan works like images (fan art, cf. www.deviantart.com) and films (fan film, cf. www.youtube.com).

The digital technology on fan fiction sites enables an intensive interactive process between readers and writers. This process offers opportunities for learning which challenge not only the authority of the school, but also the traditional system of
producing and publishing literature. In this article, we connect old and new perspectives on learning which allows us to present a new way to look at the accomplishing of literacy skills.

Method
The empirical material is drawn from an ongoing study which combines quantitative and qualitative methods. A web-based questionnaire was answered by approximately 1,000 Swedish respondents between 14 and 26 years old. This survey served as a starting point for semi-structured interviews carried out in September–October 2008.

When we set out to find informants for our interview study, we started out by identifying a number of fan writers who had published texts in Swedish on the world’s biggest fan fiction archive, fanfiction.net. Since, as in most communities, the members are able to present themselves with a ‘profile’ we were able to find out some more basic information about the writers. Two important parts of the profiles are the ‘Friends’ and ‘Favourites’ sections. In these sections, writers link to other fan fiction writers to which they feel some kind of connection. Using these links we were able to use a cascading (or snowball) technique to find additional Swedish fan fiction writers. In total, we identified 81 fan writers who were contacted via email or via internal messages within the websites.

Of the 81 fan writers we were able to convince 31 to participate in our study. The 31 informants are all girls between 12-28 years. It is certainly an interesting fact that no boys were willing to participate in our study. However, this issue will not be further examined in this article but will be explored in forthcoming publications. We further note that since the female domination of the fan fiction scene has been recognised by other scholars (e.g. Gray 2008) our focus on young female fan fiction writers as learners and literary prosumers is both relevant and well motivated.

Out of the 31 interviews, 9 interviews was answered via email, 20 were conducted via telephone, and 2 at real-life meetings. There are primarily two reasons behind the different interview modes. One is geography – the writers were scattered all over Sweden and it was difficult to visit them or to bring them all to a specific location. The other reason is personal integrity – some writers did not want to talk in real-time but preferred to answer in writing. The first real-time interview was jointly made by the two authors in order to synchronise the authors and ensure that both would conduct the remaining interviews in a similar style.

Apart from questions about age, sex, occupation, place of living, parents’ level of education etc, we also asked the respondents to describe their habits as a contributors to different fan fiction sites. We wanted to know which fandoms they like and on which websites they publish. They were also asked to describe motivational factors for their interest as well as if, and in that case how, fan fiction plays a part in their development as readers and writers. Finally, we wanted to know their opinions and experiences from reading and writing at school.
The interviews, which on average lasted 30 minutes, were recorded and transcribed independently by the two authors. The data were then merged and both authors analysed the entire material from all 31 interviews in parallel. The authors’ findings were then discussed and any dissonances between the two analyses were sorted out. This process ensured that the data created are of high quality and reliability.

Identity, gender and literacy

In matters concerning learning, questions about identity are often very important. Communities on the Internet like fan fiction sites enable contributors to experiment with new identities (Hellekson & Busse 2006; Sundén 2002; Svenningson Elm 2008; Turkle 1997). There are many different activities in a community which in concert make up a contributor’s online identity. In this study we focus on contributors’ stories and interactions with their peers and focus less on other areas such as their personal profiles. We do this because on many fan fiction sites it is possible to read, comment and publish texts without revealing anything more than a nickname. The personal presentation on these sites is therefore not used to express one’s identity.

Identity work is closely related to gender work. Gender is also created and maintained through different choices and actions (Butler 1990; Ambjörnsson 2004). People are constantly busy ‘doing gender’ and gender identity is, to use Butler’s word, ‘performative’ by means of actions apprehended as specifically male or female. There is no original masculinity or femininity, just a number of cultural and social rules that are relied on in order for a person to stand out as intelligible and normal.

Most fan fiction stories explore romantic relationships. Several studies show that girls use fan culture to explore romantic perceptions of boys (Gregson 2005; Mazzarella 2005; McRobbie 1991). The Internet has changed the terms for the location where this exploration can take place. However, to take one’s fantasies from a girl’s bedroom to an online fan site has its consequences. Mazzarella (2005) writes:

Through the creation of an online fan community, the friendship circle is widened. Moreover, the fact that anyone can access these Web sites shows that these girls are no longer willing to hide either their fandom or their developing sexuality behind doors (p.156).

Thus, by establishing affinity with friends on web communities, the contributors create, if not an entirely safe, at least a safer space where they are free to express themselves and where they can be confident that they will not be exposed to virtual or cultural abuse.

Fan fiction is produced by people who primarily want to identify themselves as fans. But it is also produced by people who want to identify themselves as readers and writers. It is possible to connect attitudes and competencies related to reading and writing to identity and gender. As an active contributor in a fan fiction community
where you practice and develop literacy, you at the same time construct and explore
gender and identity (Frosh et al. 2002).

Literacy has traditionally been connected with young students’ ability to read and
write printed texts. Today, literacy is often considered to refer to the complicated
relationship between reading skills and different genres and media. There is not
only one type of literacy, but several different literacies requiring several different
communication abilities.

It is not possible to consider literacies as constant skills which you acquire once
and keep for life. Several scholars such as Barton (2007), Säljö (2005) and Street
(2001) emphasise the social dimension of literacies. It is argued that literacies can
be understood as a practice based on socio-cultural processes. Thus, digital technolo-
gies, virtuality and participatory culture, and the socio-cultural processes they enable,
create new ways to build literacies. For example, the interaction between writers and
readers on fan fiction sites is important for how the narratives develop. Through this
collective process readers and writers build their literacies together.

There is an ongoing process on fan fiction sites where norms and conditions for
reading and writing are communicated and negotiated. By interacting as prosumers
the contributors to these sites create interpretive and discursive communities with
specific norms concerning text and narrative (Olin-Scheller 2008). An interpretive
community starts by sharing common conceptions about how texts ought to be writ-
ten and constructed for different purposes (Fish 1993). According to Fish, the text is
‘empty’ and only gets its meaning in the reading process. On fan fiction web sites the
reader’s encounter with the text, and her understanding of the text, are shaped by
the interpretive community, i.e. the collective that the reader belongs to and by the
reading strategies and conventions that prevail there.

The same goes for sharing attitudes and norms around language discourses. Lin-
guistics uses the concept ‘discourse community’ to describe how groups share language
practices (Bizell 1992; Porter 1992). In the construction of interpretive and discursive
communities on a fan fiction site, the fictive text is used as a tool by the contributors
to understand themselves as well as the others. The fans are, by their practices related
to literacies, thus doing gender as well as constructing identities.

**Rhetoric, fan fiction and the principle of imitatio**

Earlier in this paper we argued that the affinity spaces characterising web commu-

nities and participatory culture make fan fiction sites informal learning settings. While
these learning environments have several novel characteristics it is also possible to
trace very old and traditional concepts of learning in them. We argue that learning
through fan fiction to a considerable extent shares the values and virtues that Aristotle
once formulated as rhetoric. In recent years, this discipline of rhetoric has experi-
enced a renaissance in education. Rhetoric is increasingly looked upon as a possible
way to develop teaching in formal learning environments. However, what is today
highlighted as a viable path of pedagogical development in school sites might already be established in informal learning environments like the fan fiction communities we are exploring in this study.

Basically rhetoric is an educational discipline that includes several basic educational principles. One such principle is *imitatio* – to replicate. We turn to Johannesson for a more elaborated definition of the term: “a technology or pedagogical principle for learning to speak and write well by imitating the pattern of certain model texts” (Johannesson 2006, p. 281, our translation).

In ancient times, imitation and replication of the work of major poets such as Cicero was regarded as a good way not only to develop and learn, but also to build up a linguistic repertoire and a good vocabulary (Eriksson 2002). Through the centuries, a confusion between *imitatio* and plagiarism has occurred, giving *imitatio* a bad reputation as an educational principle. To imitate and reproduce someone else’s work has not been something teachers have advocated (Hansson 2003a; Kindeberg & Sigrell 2008; Malmgren 1996). Others have argued that imitation may undermine students’ critical thinking (Andersen 1995) and that students at all educational levels should develop their own means of expression, write in their own words or find their own personal style (cf. Nilsson 2002). However, how students are supposed to gain these apparently unique skills and competencies remains somewhat unclear.

In its original meaning, however, the *imitatio* principle is more about developing a text rather than merely reproducing a text. Quintilianus, the roman rhetorician, said: “What would the result be if we do not achieve anything more than our role models?” (Quintilianus ca. A.D. 35–ca. 100; 2002, our translation). *Imitatio* is about striving to gather an arsenal of different methods and means of expression. This knowledge is kept in our *copia*, i.e. our register of possible linguistic alternatives (Sigrell 2008). The distinct samples and impressions which have been actively collected are then structured in *topics* – i.e. locations in the memory landscape, in the mental landscape or in the cultural landscape where content and language material is stored and retrieved (Wolrath Söderberg 2006:74). The individual who imitates in an active way, according to the principle of *imitatio*, collects language alternatives very consciously. On the other hand, for a person who is imitating passively, the collecting process is unconscious and the material collected remains unsorted data with no function or application. Therefore, learning through *imitatio* is not only imitating a finished model but also learning to choose from the collected language material and then to transfer it to a new context. Thus, as several researchers have pointed out, a re-appropriation of the original meaning of imitation where passive and active imitation is dissociated may help to illuminate important aspects of learning (Kindeberg 2006; Håkansson 2008).

**Imitating the original ...**

In fan fiction, imitation is certainly an active process. The original work in itself is the very framework and point of departure of the narrative. In addition, texts from
more experienced contributors also form role models for those with less experience. For many fans *imitatio* is seen as showing respect; you simply want to show that you think something is good. For example, our respondent Eva says that for her “imitating is the highest form of flattery!” However, fans do not want to be challenged in their perceptions of the original work’s characters and settings. They stick to the *canon*, i.e. the textual universe that the original author has created and which the fans are seeking to replicate using the original’s language and style. Stories that diverge from this idea have to declare the text divergent by marking it ‘OOC’ (Out of Character) or ‘AU’ (Alternate Universe). OOC denotes stories that develop the characters away from the original and an AU moves stories to places, times and settings that do not match the original work.

Thus, the contributors to Harry Potter fan fiction sites often strive to keep texts close to Rowling’s language and style. How well you succeed is commented on in feedback. For example, a fan who is a reader of a story about the evil magician Lord Voldemort says:

> Great!!! I like that you write in a Tom Riddlely way. Well, I don’t take for granted that you get this, but ... what I meant was that the way you write about Tom Riddle reminds me of JK Rowling’s way. And I mean it as something good. You can recognise his behaviour as I imagine it. GoodGoodGood!!

Some contributors stick to one genre within a single fandom, others make crossovers between different original works and are active in a lot of genres. If you do the latter you have to change and adapt your style considerably from text to text. This way of working with language and narrative – to replicate or imitate – serves as an excellent way of gradually developing literary knowledge and serves as a practical application of different linguistic and genre-related skills.

Using the original text as a point of departure for new stories also makes fans conscious about the framework of the narrative – that people in all times have continued stories, retold them differently and created new characters and plots. Cecilia, aged 19 years, says that when she watches a film a TV series or reads a book she always starts wondering if anyone has been inspired and written fan fiction about it. This shows that Cecilia has unconsciously understood the principle of intertextuality – that new stories always relate to already told ones (Olsson 2002; Palm 2002).

... and composing new genres

For a majority of people interviewed, the subgenre known as slash (stories based on pairings with persons of the same sex, usually men) seems to have a big impact of the identity construction process. “I think I like slash because then I don’t have to identify with the girl”, Elin says. Nellen also likes slash, primarily within animé fandom. She points out that she is interested in slash mainly because female characters are often insufficiently described. “The girls in the stories are either silly or very girlish so they
are no good for pairings with the guys”, she says and continues: “So I take a ‘girlish’ man and make a pairing with an ‘ordinary’ man.”

The fans also think that slash gives them possibilities to experiment and stretch the limits, and that the genre makes them more open-minded to minorities. Sara writes:

There are no books about two gay 15-year-olds having a relation where everyone thinks it’s normal! I think I have become very heedless and tolerant of all kinds of sexual relationships and relations just by reading a lot of fan fics about the subject.

So, by taking original texts as points of departure for new stories and genres, these girls use fiction to stretch the limits in areas, which has implications for their identity and gender creation.

**Imitating each other ...**

For contributors to fan fiction sites it is evident that the ability to write and appreciate good stories is something that can be taught and something you learn. The fans we interviewed explained that they develop their competencies gradually by spending time on different sites. Linda, who is an experienced fan fiction contributor, says:

It began when I was looking for *Star Wars* stuff and I found fanfiction.net. In the beginning I mostly read and gave feedback, and after a while I started writing myself. Reading others’ fan fiction is a very strong source of inspiration and you learn a lot by doing it. For example, you learn not to repeat the same mistakes.

Thus, for Linda, reading others’ fan fiction preceded her own writing. Even less experienced contributors describe the same process when entering the fan fiction culture. Ann, 13, has been a contributor for little more than a year and has during this time found out that she can get help from more experienced participants. She says:

I only read half a year before I started writing. I read 2 fics and thought I would write myself. I began to write but did not want to publish it because I thought it was so bad. Then, I didn’t know how to do it, so I mailed someone whose stories I’ve read and asked her. She showed me.

The activity of reading and writing fan fiction is therefore closely linked to literacy development through collective interaction. Informal mentoring, where more capable participants share their knowledge with those who are less capable, is an important aspect of participatory culture. It is also evident that entry into fan fiction culture is an imitative activity. Here the fans’ overall aim is to rely on one another as writers as well as readers and critics. Carro says:

I have changed my way of writing very much since I started with fan fiction. You constantly improve, especially when you get hints from others who read what you write. You develop
when people are pointing out what you need to change. Previously, I wrote like very fast – that is, the time in my stories was fast, a chapter could be like a whole year! Now I write more in detail and develop the story more thoroughly.

... and writing something of one's own
Our study shows that some fans aspire to “write something of their own”. Marie explains:

> When you were younger you could get positive feedback that was about writing just like JK Rowling. This made me happy then – you had imitated her well and this made the story reliable in the world of Harry Potter. Now it’s more like I am trying to get a style of my own.

An important aspect of one’s development as a writer is to become independent in relation to the original text. Moreover, fans often talk in terms of developing as literary writers. For example, Camilla is concerned about being better at characterisation. She does not want to use so-called Mary Sue-characters in her stories – i.e. to use a pairing with a character who is an ideal picture of the writer herself (Gregson 2005). She thinks only beginners use Mary Sue-characters since they are simple and plain.

> “After a while”, Camilla says, “you develop as a writer and also as a person and then you can create more genuine characters far from being Mary Sue-ish.”

> When using *imitatio* actively you become aware of not only your knowledge process in itself, but also that while developing literacies you also construct identity. The fans we interviewed often mentioned that fan fiction helps them partly to communicate with people they do not know, and partly to recognise and respect different attitudes to the world and society. As Fia says:

> Before I wanted everyone to write and do what I wanted. Now I respect others’ opinions and that they do not always want to change what they think and write.

A majority of the interviewed fans also said they want some time in the future to write and publish a book of their own. For example, Ellie, aged 14, wants to become an author and for her this means that fan fiction is “like a beginning of a real authorship, a sort of practicing before the real thing”.

**Imitatio and the power of positive feedback**
Among the fans we interviewed there is a strong conception of knowledge as something being gradually acquired. Fans are also highly aware of the power of positive feedback and its role in literary production. Writers on fan fiction sites expect feedback about content, form and style after each chapter is posted. In general, the comments on the site are overwhelmingly positive and work as an encouragement to the author (Parrish 2007:111).

> This approach to developing narratives has similarities with perceptions of learning processes within the discipline of rhetoric. Already in ancient times *progymnasmata*,
a pedagogical writing, reading and rhetoric method and practice series, was formulated (Hansson 2003a; Sigrell 2008). The method, in which Afthonius’ writing exercises from the 300s are the most well known, contains 14 different exercises where, through a process of finished designs, indicative examples and good role models, one practices to become a good speaker and writer (Eriksson 2002).

The exercises, all based on imitatio and applied to different genres, are designed in seven progressive steps (Eriksson 2002). They include reading aloud and listening to others, assessing and analysing rhetorical features in texts, memorising selected texts, practicing the ability to reuse models and examples in your own words, transferring a model example to a different linguistic expression in Latin or Greek, or switching genre from prose to verse, writing a paraphrase text and, finally, receiving feedback from a teacher in the form of praise and criticism. The model includes collective learning where students can learn from each other’s good examples as well as from each other’s mistakes. In this response step, with its focus on praise and positive feedback, the teacher has a central role in the learning process and in the development of the repertoires in copia.

Through the active imitation of the original work and of peers’ fan fiction stories, as well as different genres, literary languages and styles, being a contributor to a fan fiction site in some ways means practicing progymnasmata. Moreover, the feedback from other contributors provides a vital part of the learning process and is sometimes as important as the story itself. You can easily understand the power of positive feedback when reading the comments made by readers in response to some stories. The following comment is a response to a story about the evil magician Lord Voldemort published on a Swedish Harry Potter site.

Rockstar: OOOOOHHHH, it’s just WONDERFUL! So filled with emotions, so well written. It feels as if you are there and a part of it all. And you can almost feel their feelings! You write absolutely fantastic! AND I WANT THE NEXT CHAPTER!!!

For Katie, who is one of the fans interviewed and the author of the text referred to, the feedback is of great importance for her writing. It is VERY nice, she says, to get a positive judgment on what you write. “I write more when I know that I have readers who are waiting for new chapters”, she adds. But the feedback also has significance for how the story unfolds. Katie says:

The feedback means so much. If I didn’t get any feedback there would be no point in publishing! I write for myself, but I also want people to appreciate what I do. I bring the feedback into the next chapter. If someone suggests something I often try to take it into the story.

Thus, being a prosumer – being active in both consuming and producing – plays a vital part in how the stories are created as well as in the learning processes of the fan fiction website contributors.
**Imitatio and the beta-reader**

In informal learning settings, such as in these fan fiction sites, there are no teachers who can serve as role models. Instead, in the participatory culture with its informal mentoring more experienced mentors serve as models and as support and guidance for those less experienced. Eva says she has a number of loyal readers who read everything she publishes. She continues: “When I read their texts I can see that I have inspired them, they use the same words and means of expression. It’s really awesome!!”

The affinity spaces in web communities also make participants feel like experts. Kristin has been interested in fan fiction for many years and is among the most experienced on the site where she is active. According to her, this gives her a certain responsibility. “I feel I have to give constructive feedback with concrete suggestions of how to improve the story.” But being experienced is not always connected to age. Jennie, aged 15, regards herself as an authority on Harry Potter and therefore takes on a role of an expert and informal mentor. About giving feedback to less experienced contributors, she says:

> It’s hard to be negative; you don’t want to be mean. But if it is a beginner you can say that the text isn’t good enough. But then I always write what and how they can improve. You give them, like, useful hints.

On many fan fiction sites the informal mentoring is partly organised as a sort of editorial feedback called *beta-reading* (Black 2005 & 2007). The term ‘beta’ is taken from the software industry where the words ‘alpha’ and ‘beta’ are used for products which are still a work in progress and not yet ready to be released on the market. The beta-reader function in fan fiction is a peer-to-peer teaching activity and is an important part of the informal learning culture. It helps contributors to fan fiction communities grow as writers and to master questions of language, style and composition. It also helps them by providing feedback as well as encouraging other contributors and giving them constructive advice about how to improve their stories. Nellen describes the function as follows:

> Beta-readers are very good because you get good response and they fix everything in your text in a good way. Like spelling and so on. Then I know what to improve to the next time. They do comment on the story as well. I send the story to them and rewrite it before I publish it.

Some contributors are also beta-readers themselves. Dora, aged 13, introduces herself as a beta-reader on a fan fiction site as follows:

**General descriptions**: I do basically what you want me to do. I can read already published material or mail texts you want me to read before you publish. I only expect that you have exerted yourself and don’t expect me to do the work!

As one of her strengths, Nora mentions that she is good at composing. “And noticing words that are wrong like HIM’S [instead of his], that gives me an alergic (sic!) reaction”, she writes and adds a laughing smiley (XD).
Like Dora, Kristin acts both as a beta-reader and uses beta-readers in her own writing process. Frequently the story develops in close interaction between the author and the beta-reader. “Often you are two persons helping each other and you often discuss the story together”, she says. Kristin also has different beta-readers for different purposes, one that corrects grammar and spelling, another for discussions about how to compose the story.

**Conclusions**

Being a fan fiction writer can in many ways be considered as an active replicating – or imitating – process which enables considerable opportunities for learning. There are several facets of the learning which takes place. First, the contributors become highly aware that knowledge develops gradually. Second, they are conscious that they learn and develop by actively imitating and sharing knowledge with one another. Third, the contributors actively imitate things such as genre, forms and style of narrative and language. They develop an understanding of the principle of intertextuality as well as a meta-language about narrative. Moreover, on the fan fiction sites they create interpretive and discourse communities which are important for the development and construction of literacy, gender and identity. All of this together gives the fans tools to be powerful actors within formal as well as informal learning settings.

For developing people’s literacies, *imitatio* offers big opportunities. But, of course, there is always another side to the picture. Expressions of culture and communities for interpretation and discourse are all built upon conventions loaded with ideology and values. The sites have no formal censorship where (traditional) notions about religion, gender and ethnicity are discussed and questioned. Even if the readers can oppose descriptions of characters and settings, questioning traditional and conventional ways of describing relations between men and women or prejudices towards race and religion does not come automatically. Thus, to blindly replicate original works and fan fiction stories runs the risk of not only reproducing formal and structural textual elements (the literary repertoire of the text), but also of reproducing aspects of generally dominant moral values and political and religious convictions. Nonetheless, the significance of *imitatio* for reading and writing fan fiction means that it could be a creative way of developing literary instruction in classrooms. Teaching offers big opportunities for the discussion of moral and ethical dilemmas raised by fiction. Even though learning in informal learning settings such as fan fiction sites differs from learning at school, using *imitatio* can help make visible conventions and clichés and make them a target for teaching.

The fans we interviewed in our study all agree that writing in school is often difficult. A common statement is that “in school you always have to find out and create everything yourself!”. Thus, to use original texts and textual universes as a point of departure and to assist students to actively, and with a conscious progression, replicate different genres, languages and styles seems to be a constructive way for teachers to
work with literary issues. Remember though, as several fans note, you must allow any textual universe into the classroom. “It doesn’t have to be books, but as well a computer game or a TV series, and it must be okay to write about World of Warcraft or Ninja Turtles if you want to”, one of them says. Finally, formal learning settings must also consider the role of the prosumer and the drivers behind participatory culture.

And – not the least – use the power of positive feedback!

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