

EXPLORING LITERACY SPONSORSHIP IN THE DIGITAL EXTRACURRICULUM:  
HOW STUDENTS' PARTICIPATION IN FAN FICTION SITES CAN INFORM  
COMPOSITION PEDAGOGY

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
(English and Education)  
in The University of Michigan  
2011

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

For excellence the presence of others is always required.

– Hannah Arendt

I owe my development as a scholar and teacher to the many instructors, mentors, and friends within and beyond the academy who have lent me their time as well as their words of wisdom. This project would not exist without you.

Thank you to my committee members, who offered support in ways too numerous to count. Anne Ruggles Gere's work is what brought me to the University of Michigan and the Joint Program in English and Education (JPEE); I remain awed and inspired by her commitment to the field of composition. It has been an honor to work with Elizabeth Birr Moje, whose groundbreaking work in adolescent literacy practices inspired this project. I am a smarter and more compassionate instructor and researcher for having worked with and learned from Anne Curzan, who served as the director of the English Department Writing Program during my time at Michigan and who constantly inspired me to think more deeply about everything. And last but certainly not least, June Howard's work within genre studies as well as her commitment to both teaching and learning has shaped my scholarship and my sense of myself as a student and instructor. I am grateful to these four women for their extraordinary generosity, humor, guidance, and friendship.

My colleagues in JPEE supported me in every imaginable way throughout my time in Ann Arbor: Stephanie Moody, Heather and Mike Thomson Bunn, Ebony Thomas, Randy Pinder, Ben Gunsberg, Kelly Sassi, Brett Griffith, Melinda McBee Orzulak, Donna Scheidt, Jim Beitler, Jill Lamberton, and Amy Carpenter Ford. I am honored to count these colleagues as dear friends who have nurtured me emotionally and intellectually in ways that I will carry with me going forward.

To those faculty members at Michigan, Boston College, and other institutions who have also supported me along the way, I express my deepest gratitude: Lesley Rex,

Meg Sweeney, Jay Lemke, Josh Miller, Lad Tobin, Paula Mathieu, Tom Newkirk, Deborah Brandt, Anis Bawarshi, Nedra Reynolds, Henry Jenkins, Rebecca Black, and Juli Parrish. I owe special thanks Rebecca, who through her work introduced me to the world of fan fiction. I was so inspired by what she had to say about adolescents who were learning to write in these extracurricular sites that I decided to design a study of my own that would plunge me into that amazing world and help me think about the potential benefits for the field of composition. Lad and Paula introduced me to the field of composition over a decade ago when I was teaching at Boston College, and I owe them a tremendous debt of gratitude for their ongoing mentorship.

Thank you to my friends scattered across the country who keep me grounded and whose faith in me never wavers: Taryn Hakala, Casie Legette, Lauren Wolf, Kristin Fairman Thakor, Bonnie Campbell, Lorelei Scott, Lisa Curtis, Jan and Sydney Wyma, Jean and Larry Chapman, Elaine Healy, Michelle Meade Beckham, Sara Smith Peters, Inna Lyandres Kelly, Katie and Tyler Doupe, Nicole Eppolito Spence, Robert Stanton and Dianne Berg, Tim Lindgren, Bryan Marinelli, Matt Heitzman, Sara Stenson, Wendy Cannella, Alison Van Vort, Alison MacNeil, Amy Hubbard Jones, Camille Arnold Wilder, Jenni Adams Maitlen, Celeste Karzon, Amanda and Scott Ferreira, Megan and Tim Buckley, Megan Gordon, Megan Ryan, Sara Manion Bucchop, Marshall Blodgett, Beth Sanchez, Linda Thomas, the Kalicow family, Jeannie Loughry, Jeanie Laubenthal, Mary Wright, Angie and Scott Berkley, Emily Douglas, Lisa Del Torto, Annie Hesp, Rob Maclean, Nate Houchens, Chris and Louisa Pruitt, Heather Foster, Darin Stockdill, Paul Pearson, and the Engel family. I cannot begin to express my love and appreciation.

Let me also thank those enthusiastic and loyal students who agreed to participate in this study: Cam, KouTai, FlightOFFenix, Rae, Kit, and Kayla. This project would have not been possible without you, and I have been humbled by your talent and willingness to talk to me, an outsider, about your literacy practices. Your participation will help literacy and composition scholars continue to advocate for more progressive pedagogies that invite into the classroom and honor extracurricular literacy practices.

My deepest gratitude to the academic and extracurricular organizations that have contributed to my professional and personal development over the past five years: Rackham Graduate School, University of Michigan English Department Writing

Program, Center for Research on Learning & Teaching, Digital Media Studies Group, HASTAC, Language & Rhetorical Studies Group, Sopranos, Office of New Student Programs, A2 Yoga, Ann Arbor YMCA, Sweetland Writing Center, ETS, Lovely TV Ladies, Hampton Press, and Longman, as well as the many coffee shops around town that provided space and sustenance.

To my students at Boston College and the University of Michigan: I have been truly blessed to teach college composition and to work with such amazing students who challenged me every day to be a better instructor and scholar. You have been tremendous teachers.

My family may not always understand my path, but they have never wavered in their love, patience, and support. I could not have done any of this work without you. I love you more than I can ever express.

Thank you a million times over to Beth Davila, Hannah Dickinson, Diane Hotten-Somers, Steve Engel, and Rebecca Ingalls—tremendous friends who read drafts of this dissertation and provided invaluable advice and vision on everything from my ideas to my methodology to my formatting. Special thanks to Beth, who read every word (several times) and who supported me every step of the way. I could not have accomplished this feat without your careful reading and constant encouragement. And special thanks as well to Rebecca, whose doctoral work on spoken word introduced to me key concepts that I would later take up in my own dissertation. I remain inspired by her, both personally and professionally.

Finally, thank you to Brett Karopczyc, the love of my life, who has offered new insight not only about this dissertation project but also about life in general. I have been transformed by your love.

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## ABSTRACT

### EXPLORING LITERACY SPONSORSHIP IN THE DIGITAL EXTRACURRICULUM: HOW STUDENTS' PARTICIPATION IN FAN FICTION SITES CAN INFORM COMPOSITION PEDAGOGY

by

Staci Lynn Shultz

Co-Chairs: Anne Ruggles Gere and Elizabeth Birr Moje

This dissertation examines the fan fiction literacy practices of six college students in two sites, FanFiction.Net and LiveJournal.com, and argues for the importance of inviting into the classroom students' literacy experiences in the extracurriculum to understand how they reveal prior understandings of reading and writing that inform students' practices within the curriculum. These sites, as I propose college composition courses should also do, invite participants to share their experiences in other discourse communities and offer opportunities for participants to co-construct writing ideologies, in part through their focus on reflection and collaboration. This study also reveals contradictions, including conflicted definitions of "constructive criticism" and authors' desire for feedback and yet their resistance toward reading it or revising accordingly.

This dissertation also demonstrates the value of using a framework of literacy sponsorship as articulated by Deborah Brandt, in combination with positioning theory, to interrogate how sites recruit, enable, regulate, and suppress (Brandt 2001) literacy and interactively position participants according to the circulating writing ideologies. The

ideologies overlap significantly with those found in composition classrooms, including valuing interaction, collaboration, constructive criticism, reflection, and correctness. Yet the ideologies also compete, as illustrated on one hand by the perceived importance of “correctness” in mechanics, reinforced by FanFiction.Net’s Codes of Conduct, and on the other hand by the importance of what composition instructors consider “global” concerns, such as authentic depictions of characters and credible plotlines. I reveal how participants negotiate these writing ideologies, defining what constitutes “good” writing and “good” feedback by reflecting on their skills, experiences, and preferences as they design their profile pages and when they provide feedback on each other’s stories.

The dissertation concludes by situating the study in conversation with the Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing designed by the Council of Writing Program Administrators. This research of online writing practices offers evidence of students demonstrating in the extracurriculum some of the “habits of mind” the WPA describes as essential to success in college writing. Finally, I suggest practical ways to use the extracurriculum, and specifically sites in Web 2.0, to help develop students’ rhetorical knowledge, critical thinking, and knowledge of conventions.

CHAPTER ONE  
COLLEGE STUDENTS AND FAN FICTION:  
EXPLORING LITERACY PRACTICES IN THE DIGITAL EXTRACURRICULUM

Although it remains largely invisible and inaudible to us, writing development occurs regularly and successfully outside classroom walls.

– Anne Ruggles Gere

**Introduction**

On April 7, 2009, episode twenty of the fifth season of the hugely popular television show *House, M.D.* debuted on the FOX Broadcasting Company channel. The episode opened with the discovery that the character of Dr. Lawrence Kutner, played by actor Kal Penn, had committed suicide.

Within minutes of the episode's conclusion, fans took to the Internet, establishing memorial pages for Dr. Kutner on Facebook and posting comments of shock and disbelief across websites and blogs. Many fans and critics were outraged, feeling this was the final insult to an overall disappointing fifth season. Kutner's suicide reflected what appeared to be a growing disconnect between the show's writers and fans. Critic Alan Sepinwall of *The Star-Ledger* argued that the death was pointless; *The A.V. Club* claimed that the sudden death of a major character for no discernable reason was a "dramatic cheap shot." Maureen Ryan of *The Chicago Tribune* concluded, "*House* used to be one of the best shows on TV, but it's gone seriously off the rails." Even Penn acknowledged, in an online interview with *Entertainment Weekly* that appeared after the episode aired, his surprise at the violent demise of his character:

that news struck me in the same way we hope it strikes the audience: there was a little bit of anger and some depression. You really go through those emotions, especially when somebody dies in that fashion. Ultimately, it was a really interesting choice for [the writers] to make. We don't really know why he did it. [...] There's no note. There's no explanation.

To *House* fan fiction writers—that sub-community of fans who not only watch the show, but also use the plot lines and characters to create their own stories—the decision by the show’s writers to have Kutner kill himself was particularly troubling. By having Kutner, an otherwise well-adjusted and healthy character who, in the previous episode described himself as exactly the kind of person who would *not* commit suicide, kill himself, the show’s writers had taken him out of character—OOC. In the world of fan fiction, this is a cardinal sin.

Having spent the past year interviewing college students who write *House* fan fiction, also called fanfic,<sup>1</sup> analyzing the words of advice exchanged between participants across fan fiction websites on how to create the most compelling and accurate stories (also called *fics*), and dissecting each *House* episode myself, I too recognized this as an egregious violation of character. As one study participant, Cam, complained in her interviews with me, “I realize that the writers liked the whole thing with no signs, but it’s a TV-show, not reality, and continuity is nice. The suicide didn’t feel like continuity—it felt like a ‘shocking’ out.” In fan fiction, guidelines exist to discourage writers from taking inappropriate liberties that would somehow violate the spirit of the source text. It is a fine line to walk: fanfic writers can take two heterosexual characters and put them in a homosexual relationship, but those characters must otherwise remain recognizable. Indeed, fan fiction participants in the two sites of study, FanFiction.Net (FFN) and LiveJournal.com (LJ), work within a variety of guidelines provided by a number of sources, including the site designers, the advertisers, and the participants of the *House* fandom. These guidelines convey to participants how, for instance, to engage with *House* as a source text; how to interact with other fan fiction participants; and how to adhere to generic and stylistic conventions while still being inventive. In essence, these guidelines express circulating ideologies about “good” writing and “good” feedback in fan fiction communities. As participants take up these guidelines (in part or full) they co-construct

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<sup>1</sup> In this dissertation, I use the terms interchangeably, though it might be helpful to note that *fanfic* is a term primarily used among fan fiction participants. As I present the findings from my study of college writers who participate in fan fiction, it is essential that I also define key terms along the way, both in an effort to bridge the gap between fan fiction participants and those not familiar with the community, and to further legitimize this community by introducing the ever-evolving and expansive vocabulary that it has developed over many decades to capture its rich identities and practices. This dissertation thus serves as a kind of cultural dictionary—albeit a small one—that offers a glimpse into fan culture at a particular moment.

their own ideologies and create a sense of *ethos*—that is, how they describe their guiding beliefs or ideals and how they present themselves—within the *House* discourse community.

In fact, returning to the controversial episode I opened with, the strong emotional reaction to the writer’s decision made visible the thriving *discourse community* (Gee, *Introduction*) of one of the most popular shows on television, a community comprised of increasingly participatory fans interested not only in watching *House*, but also in contributing to it—in this case, by composing stories involving the text and also by engaging in conversations about their composing processes. In doing so, these participants transform from consumers to producers, contributing and distributing their knowledge and skills to a variety of conversations and deliberations, from the plotlines on *House* to the features most essential for successful fan fiction.

I argue in this dissertation that these sites operate not only as discourse communities, but also as contemporary versions of what Deborah Brandt calls *sponsors of literacy* that have emerged in the era of Web 2.0—sites within which, as Anne Ruggles Gere argues, “writing development occurs regularly and successfully outside classroom walls” (“Kitchen” 76) and within which millions of fan fiction writers, including college students, participate in a variety of “old” and “new”<sup>2</sup> literacy practices that are consonant with those of the composition classroom, including writing, reflecting, reviewing, and revising. Using a framework of sponsorship in combination with positioning theory, both of which I describe in detail in this chapter, I explore the circulating writing ideologies in fan fiction communities and the ways participants in fan fiction sites co-construct (alongside the site and other participants) their own ideologies about what constitutes “good” writing and “good” feedback. Finally, I argue that putting the extracurriculum in conversation with the curriculum affords opportunities for students to develop a critical literacy that will serve them in all the sites they inhabit. Thus I return to this triad I have constructed—literacy sponsorship, positioning theory, and writing ideology—throughout

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<sup>2</sup> I highlight the terms “old” and “new” as a nod to my conversations with Elizabeth Moje and her point that literacy scholars must move beyond declaring literacy practices, particularly in Web 2.0, as “new” and offer more critical analysis of them. She argues that the binary of “old” and “new” is often not productive, especially since so many literacy practices, including those in fan fiction sites, are not necessarily new, but rather old practices occurring in new spaces or with new resources (“Personal”). Thus, in this dissertation I avoid describing the literacy practices in online fan fiction communities in these terms.

the dissertation in an effort to create new possibilities for thinking about the implications of students' everyday literacy practices on how composition is taught.

In this chapter, I introduce the study, situating it at the intersection of ongoing conversations occurring across multiple disciplines including literacy, composition, and media studies. At the end of the chapter, I articulate my research questions and provide a road map for the dissertation.

### **Defining (Critical) Literacy In and Out of the Classroom**

In this project focused on college students' literacy practices, it is essential first to define what counts as *literacy*. Definitions of literacy fall along a broad spectrum, from the ability to read and write alphabetic print (Goody) to those that posit literacy as any form of oral and/or written communicative practice (Resnick and Gordon). Sociocultural and New Literacy Studies (NLS) perspectives have effectively expanded our notions of literacy beyond discrete, rule-governed decoding and encoding skills to include consideration of many shifting forms of semiotic and textual meaning-making practices. According to Moje et al., a sociocultural perspective on literacy

acknowledges the role of print and other symbol systems as being central to literate practice, but recognizes that the learning and use of symbols is mediated by and constituted in social systems and cultural practices.  
("Complex" 2)

In keeping with this definition, literacy is also the process of comprehending text and making meaning of it in various contexts. For fan fiction writers, this might mean reading a book and making sense of it in one context, and then going online to read fanfic about that book—where the characters might be the same, but the setting and plotlines are different, as are the mediums, genres, and number of other readers and writers involved in the literacy experience—and making sense of it another context. As Henry Jenkins explains, fanfic offers evidence of writers finding their way into communities, genres, and texts through creative and critical interactions: fans “play with the rough spots of the text—its narrative gaps, its excess details, its loose ends and contradictions—in order to find openings for [their] elaborations of its world and speculations about characters” (*Textual* 74). In their interviews with me, the study participants echo this explanation in the reasons why they participate in fan fiction; they want to take the characters and text

they love and extend the storylines and create new possibilities for the characters while still honoring the spirit of the text and those characters. As one of the study participants, Kit, explains, fan fiction is:

about more than just the love of writing. It's about a love of the source material. I write a particular television show or movie because I connected with what the author was trying to portray. Because I saw something deeper that I wanted to pull up to the surface and tinker with.

Furthermore, the study participants want to do all of this in the company of other fans who share their affection and are also interested in developing their writing skills. Online fan fiction communities afford fans the opportunity to make sense of a text across contexts, to make sense of the written text alongside other symbol systems or forms of representation (Moje et al., "Working"), and to demonstrate a sophisticated use of language and literacy.

Shirley Brice Heath's groundbreaking ethnographic study on the influences of at-home literacy and cultural practices on students' performance in school paved the way for new ways of defining and teaching literacy. Subsequent research projects (Alvermann; Finders; Ingalls; Lewis and Fabos; Moje; Shuman; Young, Green, and Wisenbaker), generated out of NLS as well as the "social turn" in composition studies, began to focus not on individual writers and their "private" writing experiences, but rather on the social and material conditions within which writers work, both within and beyond the classroom, and on the reasons why some students seek out sites of literacy beyond the classroom. In her essay "Kitchen Tables and Rented Rooms: The Extracurriculum of Composition," Gere describes the extracurriculum as those

enormous number of individuals who meet in the living rooms, nursing homes, community centers, shelters for the homeless, around kitchen tables, and in rented rooms to write down their worlds. These writers bear testimony to the fact that writing development occurs outside of formal education. (76)

Gere argues that acknowledging the writing development that occurs beyond the classroom could lead to the development of more inclusive, critical, and relevant pedagogies. Likewise, in her observations of the tagging practices of "gangsta adolescents," Elizabeth Moje argues that her study participants use literacy practices "to be a part of a story—or to claim a space, construct an identity, and take social positions in

their worlds” (“Story” 653). She claims that understanding students’ relationships to unsanctioned literacies, as well as their meta-cognitive awareness of these relationships, may help instructors recognize the legitimacy of the literacy practices students choose outside of school.

Most recently, Andrea Lunsford’s *Stanford Study of Writing*, a five-year longitudinal study that chronicles the writing of 189 students as they make their way through college and one year beyond, reinforces the significance of studying the extracurriculum. She states that students are “deeply engaged” with extracurricular writing during their undergraduate years: “For these students, extracurricular writing is extraordinarily important—more often, more important to them than anything they were doing in their classes” (qtd. in Sullivan). Her findings resonate with arguments made by scholars in literacy and composition studies who call for continued focus on the extracurriculum. Indeed, scholars studying the extracurriculum urge educators to find ways to build bridges between students’ in- and out-of-class writing experiences, arguing that these practices and identities are far too valuable to ignore. If, as instructors, we understand that literacy learning occurs in various situations, we can acknowledge the experiences and skills student writers bring to the classroom. In turn, we can help students think critically about their literacy practices in the extracurriculum and how, for instance, these experiences might inform their experiences within the curriculum.

In the past decade, research projects examining students’ literacy learning in the extracurriculum have focused on digital contexts and on what has come to be known as the *digital extracurriculum* (Black; boyd; Jenkins; King and O’Brien; Leander and McKimm; Gee, *Video Games*; Steinkuehler; Thompson). As King and O’Brien observe:

Our youth, who are increasingly inattentive and disinterested in school, are increasingly developing an unsanctioned, articulate and even masterful digitally literate, critically literate, and intermedial competence that schools are slow to recognize or adapt to. (50)

In particular, these studies emphasize the socializing that occurs around the learning of literacy practices, as well as the social responsibilities that come with maintaining a constructive learning environment. Online fan communities devoted to pop culture icons and texts have emerged as rich sites of research for scholars in a variety of fields and disciplines, including literacy studies and digital media (Jenkins; boyd; Black; Stone),

American Cultures (Bacon-Smith; Penley; Cicioni; Hellekson and Busse; Kustritz), and, to a much lesser extent, composition studies (see Parrish). Rebecca Black argues that, given the widespread changes occurring in technology,

it is time to begin creating learning environments that, rather than reinscribing and relying on traditional structures, conventions, divisions, and notions of literacy, instead make use of the opportunities that online and networked computer environments afford. This includes gleaning as much information as possible about informal learning affinity spaces, such as online journals, blogs, games, fan fiction, and social networking sites, where youth voluntarily engage in sophisticated learning and literacy practices. (“Online” 47)

Black addresses an audience composed primarily of middle school and high school teachers; however, it is clear to me that college composition instructors should pursue these same conversations in an effort to make writing classes more relevant to students and to acknowledge the increasingly complex writing situations they encounter in and out of the classroom. Lunsford’s study not only reinforces the value of continued attention to the extracurriculum but also the value of focusing on college students’ extracurricular literacy practices in particular. Indeed, several scholars have urged researchers to pay more attention to college students’ participation in the digital extracurriculum. For example, Dana Wilber notes that the new literacy practices of college-age students “comprise a much under-researched area, despite a growing interest in new literacy research and the early and heavy uptake of new digital technologies within higher education settings from the 1960s onward” (553). She notes that the bulk of current research strands or trajectories has focused mainly on student attitudes toward digital technologies encountered in their coursework, rates of participation in online contexts associated with coursework or the effectiveness of new technology inclusion in terms of student perceptions of enhanced course quality or increased performance outcomes (554). This body of research includes the examination of the role of technology in college composition practices (e.g., Anson; Hawisher and Selfe; Quarshie-Smith); explorations of students’ abilities to evaluate the credibility and reliability of online resources (e.g., Burton and Chadwick; Weiler; Maughan; Metzger et al.); the contribution of technology for enhancing foreign and English-language-learning outcomes (e.g. Abrams; Thorne and Payne); and the role of listservs and threaded discussion boards in improving student

participation or rates of interaction in college courses (e.g. Pena-Shaff and Nicholls; Larson and Keiper; Glenn, Hoyt, and Jones). However, little of this research, Wilber argues, focuses on the systematic study of college students' everyday literacy practices involving digital technologies, contrasting markedly with the now sizable and growing amount of research that has a sociocultural orientation and focuses on the new literacy and technology practices of adolescents and children in a range of contexts (554). Steve Jones also calls for a much more sustained research focus on college students, arguing that this demographic has long played an important role in shaping how new technologies are taken up, changed, modified, and reworked to suit a range of social and literacy practices. In our composition classrooms, how many of us take the time to talk to our students about their everyday writing lives? Do we ask them about the responsibilities they feel (or not) to their writing activities and spaces, and if they feel more authoritative in one community versus another? Do we dismiss these extracurricular practices, many of them rooted in popular culture, because we assume they are playful or even disruptive rather than critical or productive? If students' extracurricular practices are as important to them as Lunsford's study suggests, and if these practices are as dynamic as the research of Black and others suggests, it seems that inviting students to talk about them within the context of the composition classroom is an essential pedagogical practice. Doing so can help bridge the extracurriculum and curriculum and can serve as a way to help students enhance their rhetorical knowledge and critical thinking skills by, for instance, comparing the social and material conditions across different sites of literacy.

It is among these questions and conversations that I situate this dissertation project. By focusing on college students in online fan fiction sites, this dissertation directs scholarly attention to college students' participation within multiple learning environments, including the digital extracurriculum--a domain worthy of study, particularly in terms of recognizing why it is so compelling to college student writers and in terms of what critical literacy skills and dispositions students might be acquiring in these spaces.

In the following section, I introduce the concept of writing ideologies, noting how this project contributes to ongoing conversations about literacy in its examination of what constitutes "good" writing and "good" feedback—according to the different agents such

as the sponsors, the participants, and the advertisers—within online sites of literacy. The presence of college students in these communities demonstrates that some of our composition students engage in rich everyday literacy practices beyond the classroom that may well influence their dispositions and practices within the classroom. As such, these sites serve as useful contexts for continued research of students’ literacy practices and negotiations of writing ideologies in the extracurriculum.

### **Writing Ideology**

I borrow Mark Lewis’s neutral definition of *ideology* as “a set of cohesive beliefs, attitudes, and knowledge with the understanding that these beliefs, attitudes, and knowledge have connections and expressions in associated practices, relationships, and institutions” (8). Lewis notes that the themes that emerge from language and writing ideology research include linking beliefs, practices, and society; questioning normativity; and showing intersections between language ideologies and other ideologies (6).<sup>3</sup> He explains that institutions of schooling have historically been constructed

as the proper places for youth to learn the correct skills and dispositions that make them into economically productive and loyal citizens, and teachers understood as having access to knowledge that students need to acquire, especially with regard to writing. (35)

As such, schools have served as sites for the reproduction of writing ideologies—that is, of teaching and upholding values and beliefs associated with “good” writing. Such values and beliefs often emphasize, for instance, correct grammar and style. Universally, *good* writing, Lewis notes, is “usually synonymous with *school-approved*” (35).

In the field of composition, scholars like Anis Bawarshi resist this universal definition of “good” writing, arguing that effective composition pedagogy asks students to critically assess how “good” writing gets defined from text to text, community to community, so that they might successfully produce writing according to those particular conventions and expectations. Web 2.0 has made more visible writing communities like those devoted to fan fiction, wherein learning and instruction occur beyond a school-

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<sup>3</sup> While this dissertation aims to reveal the beliefs and practices of fan fiction participants, and to explore the intersections as well as disconnects across the ideologies represented in fan fiction communities, it is not a linguistic project; rather, I refer to language ideology scholarship only to establish a precedence for studying writing ideologies and to define this term that I use throughout the dissertation.

sanctioned curriculum and where participants engage in practices that reflect their “beliefs, attitudes, and knowledge” about writing and other literacy practices bound up in fan fiction. The year-long qualitative study I conducted of six college students’ participation in FFN and LJ reveals participants’ negotiation of circulating ideologies—visible in rules of engagement established by the site operators, advertisers, and individual participants—and their co-construction of writing ideologies, specifically pertaining to “good” writing and “good” feedback. Indeed, FFN and LJ reveal discourse communities in action: committed participants engaging in ongoing conversations and deliberations about what constitutes “good” authorship, “good” writing, and “good” feedback in these sites of literacy and navigating writing ideologies that emphasize interaction, collaboration, constructive feedback, reflection, and correctness. Participants’ negotiation, indeed co-construction, of these ideologies—including the intersections and disconnects—is my object of study.

### **New Approaches to Studying Fan Fiction Communities**

As I explain in Chapter Two, fan fiction requires constant redefining, especially as the practice has almost entirely moved online and, in the process, generated new tools, participants, and practices. For now, a succinct definition is sufficient: fan fiction is the practice wherein fans consume, produce, and circulate stories centered on a particular pop culture source text—such as *House, M.D.*—as well as engage in discussions of these practices. In this section, I discuss the ways other scholars theorize fan fiction communities and suggest an alternative way to approaching them that reveals the methods by which participants, some of whom are college students, position themselves within these communities and co-construct (through interaction with multiple circulating ideologies and multiple agents) writing ideologies.

Scholars approach fan fiction communities from a number of perspectives and define them as functioning in a variety of ways, including as learning communities (Black) and affinity groups (Jenkins; Black). James Gee’s theorizations of big-D and little-d discourses and discourse communities are particularly helpful ways to examine fan fiction communities, and indeed my study does just this: explores how participants use discourse to position themselves in fan Discourses. Gee makes this distinction

between little-d discourse and big-D Discourse: little-d discourse is language in use; big-D Discourse is the compilation of semiotic, material, and expressive resources, such as gestures, text, and language, that individuals use to “pull off” certain socially situated identities (*Introduction* 7). As such, big-D Discourse encompasses “ways of behaving, interacting, thinking, believing, speaking, and often reading and writing that are accepted as instantiations of particular roles (or ‘types of people’) by specific *groups of people*” (viii, original emphasis). To examine a fan fiction text is to examine the discourse communities—to study how audiences are becoming more participatory, generating their own material inspired by the text. Thus, discourse informed my methodology as I analyzed the socially-situated ways that fan fiction participants represent themselves and their personal values and beliefs about literacy—for instance, through their private and public correspondence.

Since his initial use of the term discourse community, Gee has pointed out the hazards of using the term *community*, noting that it often conjures overly positive connotations that mask possibly negative or otherwise complex relations (*Video Games*). I take his point, and appreciate continued efforts to define sites of learning in ways that may more accurately and critically capture the power dynamics. Having said that, I maintain that *discourse community* best represents the practices and identities that surround source texts like *House, M.D.*, and *community* offers a cohesive way of describing fan fiction communities, including fan scholarship, the fanfic sites (LiveJournal advertises itself as a “blogging community”) and the conversations with participants. The participants in this study often describe their motivations for participating in fanfic in terms of wanting to be part of a community, and it seems important to maintain this shared vocabulary even as I am aware of its potential shortcomings. Furthermore, I am convinced by the scholarship in composition studies that utilizes the concept of discourse community. For instance, Patricia Bizzell borrows six criteria of discourse communities as described by linguist John Swales and adapts them for composition studies. She notes that a discourse community must have:

1. a shared project;
2. a “discursive ‘forum’ accessible to all participants”;
3. group members who use the forum to carry out the project “by providing information and feedback”;

4. discourse and generic conventions;
5. increasingly specialized discourse in line with those conventions;
6. a “critical mass” of experts at any given time” who are able to introduce new members to the shared project and conventions of the community. (225-6)<sup>4</sup>

Online fan fiction communities function not only as social networks where fans share their devotion and expertise and foster connections, but also as thriving writing communities where many participants aim to improve their writing practices—all in the process of contributing to the wider *House* discourse community.

Reading, writing, responding, and collaborating are all established practices within fan fiction, a phenomenon that some scholars (Jenkins; Cumberland; Pugh) argue has existed for centuries. The Internet, however, offers unprecedented access to texts, resources, and conversations, and as such provides the means for enhancing literacy practices. As I have noted, the Internet has also made these practices much more visible, and this visibility, as I discuss throughout the dissertation, has both enhanced fans’ images and opened them up to further scrutiny from critics who maintain that fans violate the disciplinary, or appropriate, distance between text and audience (Fiske, *Cultural*). In an effort to counter this scrutiny and to (re)position fan fiction as a legitimate practice in which participants engage in meaningful conversations about their efforts, sites like FFN and LJ require that participants register with the site and agree to the terms and conditions and then create profile pages and blog homepages, which help them position themselves within the community. As such, I argue that FFN and LJ function not only as discourse communities, but also as what Deborah Brandt calls sponsors of literacy. Brandt broadly defines sponsors of literacy as “any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, or model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold, literacy—and gain advantage by it in some way” (*Literacy* 19). As she explains, historically such agents have included parents and schools as well as printing presses, governments, churches, prisons, and places of employment. Issues of power are inherent in systems of sponsorship, for these agents who are always “hovering” around

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<sup>4</sup> Bizzell paraphrases John Swales’ original criteria in *Genre Analysis: English in Academic and Research Settings*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990.

the sites of literacy contribute to the “ideological congestion” that surrounds literacy learning. She notes:

Sponsors of any kind, as we know, lend their resources or credibility to the sponsored, but do so for their own advantage, whether by direct repayment or, indirectly, by credit of association. Whenever anybody is learning to read or write anything, it is always possible to ask who is subsidizing the event (or not), how the materials involved have arrived at the scene (or not), and whose interests are served in the learning (or not). (“Sponsors” 166)

The concerns Brandt raises regarding access, agency, and agenda persist in the digital age, though the frameworks and terminology shift as new technologies emerge, new complications arise, and new voices enter into the conversations. For example, in *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture*, Jenkins describes the ways the Internet has simultaneously expanded and suppressed access to literacy and contributed to what he describes as an ever-widening “participation gap.” He explains that throughout the 1990s, the primary question was one of access but that today most Americans have at least some limited access to the Internet, if only through their public library or local school. Rather, the gap emerges from the frequency and duration of that access and whether or not it proffers extended experience with technologies, a greater familiarity with the new kinds of social interactions they enable, and a fuller mastery over the conceptual skills that consumers have developed in response to media convergence (23). In this dissertation, access is assumed; after all, the study participants could not have engaged in online fan fiction communities had they not had frequent and sustained access to technology. But I take Jenkins’ point that the issue of access has become one of *sustained* access, especially since my interest in sponsorship stems in part from how sponsors sustain participants’ interest. I also take Moje’s point that Jenkins overstates this accessibility; she notes, for instance, that the students she works with in Detroit do not always have access to computers, even in their local libraries (“Personal”). Furthermore, she notes, because of limited hardware access, the students engage in only certain types of practices, and often these practices are not the same kinds of social networking, gaming, and reading/writing practices as the young people with whom I work.

I acknowledge that unequal access to technology persists, even as my own study focuses on students whose access to digital technology is assumed. And I am encouraged by studies like the recent one published by the Kaiser Family Foundation *Generation M<sup>2</sup>: Media in the Lives of 8- to 18-Year-Olds* that indicate the participatory gaps across socioeconomic demographics have diminished significantly within the past decade. These findings indicate that we must continue to follow those students with access to technology and, furthermore, those students known as “digital natives” (Prensky) who have grown up with digital technology in order to understand how it is mediating their literacy processes as we also continue to study issues related to access and inequality. We must remain vigilant about reminding readers and policy makers that the findings of any given study may not generalize to all youth reading and writing practices.

For students who write fan fiction, the Internet has proven imperative to their access to texts, technologies, and fellow fans. Furthermore, it determines how much they can participate—that is, it can determine if they only consume texts or if they become producers of texts. This access has had several results: for instance, increasing access to video and music software, free social networking sites, and other technologies means that once-marginalized practices and participants have become more mainstream. The increased visibility of fan fiction, once a grassroots practice, means that the fans and their practices have in turn become much more accessible—to other fans but also to television producers, critics, and advertisers, all of whom can bear down in some way on fan fiction communities and impose on their practices. This increase in access, then, has been fraught with the complications historically associated with revolutions in communication technologies—diversification of forms and formats, destabilization of knowledge, and decentralization of authority (Brandt, *Sponsors* 24). For instance, questions of ownership continue to nag fanfic practices: at what point does fanfic threaten copyright? Likewise, who owns and protects fans’ materials? How are fans positioned by others, and how does this positioning enable or limit their practices?

While fan fiction has been described as a highly democratic practice (see Pugh), a framework of sponsorship insists that we remain attentive to the opportunities and inequities that persist even within emerging communities. Understanding fan fiction communities as sponsors of literacy productively challenges the assumption that the

practice is more egalitarian than other literacy practices and also helps us keep track of issues of power as these communities evolve. And so I revisit Brandt's description of sponsorship, alternating between acknowledging its usefulness in its attention to the social and material conditions of sponsorship, while also pushing to more adequately define what it means, from site to site and in Web 2.0 more generally, to "enable, support, teach, or model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold" literacy (Brandt, *Sponsors* 19) The potential for a framework of sponsorship is to reveal ideologies at work, particularly in emerging sites of literacy where power is both hierarchical and lateral and where fans are becoming increasingly participatory.

Throughout this conversation, I have used the term *position* quite deliberately. In this dissertation I illustrate the affordances of using *positioning theory* (Harré; Davies and Harré; Harré and van Langenhove; Harré and Moghaddam; Harré and Slocum; McVee et al.) in combination with a framework of literacy sponsorship to highlight the ideologies—particularly the writing ideologies—at work in fan fiction communities. Positioning theory, only recently taken up by education scholars, can deepen understandings of social relations and power dynamics across sites of literacy. Harré and Moghaddam define *position* as:

a cluster of rights and duties to perform certain actions with certain significance as acts but which also may include prohibitions or denials of access to some of the local repertoire of meaningful acts. In a certain sense in each social milieu there is a kind of Platonic realm of positions, realized in current practices, which people can adopt, strive to locate themselves in, be pushed into, be displaced from or be refused access, recess themselves from and so on, in a highly mobile and dynamics [sic] way. (5-6)

The corresponding act by which a person claims certain rights and opts for certain duties, or has them thrust upon him or her, is the act of *positioning*. Sometimes positioning is a deliberate act of which the actors are aware, but more often it "crystallises" (Harré, 1970) out of the background of social practices within which people are embedded. Harré explains that the idea of positions and positioning acts goes back some decades, but it has only recently been taken up by social psychologists and related fields to gain an understanding of people's actions and by education practitioners to study the achievement of literacy. Positions not only involve rights, duties, and obligations, but also expectations about how an individual will enact them (Harré and van Langenhove).

Whether an individual enacts (or rejects) these rights, duties, and obligations depends, in part, on his or her personal attributes (e.g. a reasonable, open-minded person) and “moral” orders (e.g. being a teacher, a doctor, a mechanic) (van Langenhove and Harré; Tan and Moghaddam). Positions, unlike *roles*, are understood to be dynamic; as Davies and Harré explain, the concept of role highlights “static, formal, and ritualistic” (43) aspects of language use, while the concept of positioning “can be seen as a dynamic alternative to the more static concept of role,” in part because positions are constantly being negotiated. There can be *interactive* positioning where what one person says positions another and *reflexive* positioning where one positions oneself, and once an individual takes up a particular position, that individual “inevitably sees the world from the vantage point of that position and in terms of particular images, metaphors, story lines and concept which are made relevant within the particular discursive practices in which they are positioned” (Davies and Harré 262).

Educational theorists note that positioning theory draws attention to the individual, local knowledge of participants involved in educational contexts. As McVee et al. explain, positioning theory can illuminate a number of issues, including that power relations are generated as a matter of course by acts of tacit positioning; that positions are ephemeral and sometimes contradictory; and that positions can create a sense of community membership. This way of attending to social performance, individual rights, duties, presuppositions, and actions offers a way for positioning theory to contribute to educational explorations—particularly, as I illustrate in this dissertation, in emerging sites of literacy such as fan fiction sites where writers, some of whom are college students, can be observed attempting to position themselves in the ideologies that occur among multiple agents. Positioning theory reveals “who is who”—that is, “who calls the shots as to the distribution of rights and duties to engage in this or that discourse format or even topic” (McVee et al. 3).

In combination with a framework of literacy sponsorship, positioning theory proves a particularly effective way to examine online fan fiction communities. For one, it reveals how, in these sites of literacy, participants are interactively positioned by the sponsors and other participants. For example, FFN’s terms and conditions position participants as authors who have the right to post stories and also the responsibility to

“lend a helping hand” to other authors by providing feedback on their stories. Through their correspondence with one another around the stories they post, participants bring to bear on this site-specific definition of authorship the values and beliefs associated with the more general values of fan fiction, such as the value of authors conducting research in order to make their stories more accurate and compelling, as well as their own knowledge of *House, M.D.* and of the writing process. Thus, they co-construct a definition of authorship, adding to it another responsibility that both enhances the author’s credibility and enhances the reputation of fan fiction writers in general. Second, positioning theory reveals how participants attempt to reflexively position themselves to reinforce, resist, or reshape this definition of authorship. The profile pages prove essential to this process of reflexive positioning; participants use these pages to position themselves as particular kinds of authors—by sharing, for instance, their preferred genres and romantic pairings—and in the process reshaping the definition of author to include the responsibility of articulating preferences.

To be sure, positioning theory affords me the opportunity to more closely examine the social roles and relations within the site and the ways the participants co-construct a vision of what constitutes constructive fan fiction literacy practices. For one, it allows me to identify the positions available to participants within this site of literacy and the associated rights and responsibilities. For example, one of the most important roles I examine in this dissertation is that of the *beta reader*, generally defined as someone who reads a work of fiction with a critical eye and attends to issues such as grammar, spelling, and characterization before the author releases the story to the public. Betas are an increasingly important presence in fan fiction communities; three of the study participants were “official” beta readers in FFN during the time of the study, which means that they assumed additional rights and responsibilities within the community that aimed to further promote good writing practices. The beta reader role has been particularly compelling to literacy scholars (see Jenkins, *Fans*; Black, *Adolescents*), but my research reveals that it is not without its limitations and contradictions—themselves worth continued exploration.

In sum, I argue that positioning theory enhances the frame of literacy sponsorship by highlighting the agents at work in any given site of literacy and the ideological

conditions that exist within the site. Combining positioning theory and literacy sponsorship can create a more powerful framework that more adequately accommodates increasingly complex power relations like those found in fan fiction communities—and those found in the composition classroom. In her review of Brandt’s book, Gere remarks:

The virtue of the concept of ‘sponsorship’ is its capacious quality; a person, an institution, a social movement, and a variety of other entities can take on this definition. But that virtue also contains the liability of sometimes making it difficult to decide what a sponsor is not. The conclusion would be strengthened by some discussion of its capacity as an analytical tool. (285)

It would seem, given Brandt’s broad definition of sponsorship, that Web 2.0 has in fact merely increased this capaciousness, providing more opportunities for individuals and organizations alike to serve as sponsors. But if everything and everyone can function as a literacy sponsor, how useful is the term? In this project, I nuance and complicate Brandt’s understanding of sponsorship—both by pairing it with positioning theory and calling for key terms like recruit, enable, regulate, and suppress to be constantly (re)defined within the context of each site of literacy—in order to, for example, understand why some fan fiction sites are more compelling than others. Furthermore, I argue that positioning theory helps realize literacy sponsorship as both a theoretical and pedagogical framework.

### **Online Fan Fiction Communities and Composition Pedagogy**

It may seem counterintuitive to turn to writing in the extracurriculum in order to improve writing in the curriculum. Indeed, literacy scholars (see Alvermann; Jenkins; Gee; Black) have acknowledged that simply taking the activities that occur within the extracurriculum and duplicating them in the classroom will not likely be productive. As Jenkins notes, “Schools have less flexibility to support writers at very different stages of their development. Even the most progressive schools set limits on what students can write compared to the freedom they enjoy on their own” (184-185). It has been easy to explain away the appeal by noting that these extracurricular literacy practices are not required, and that anything not required and done for fun is naturally compelling to students. Certainly there is truth to this rationale, but studies (Jenkins; Black; Thompson) demonstrate that student writers engaged in these extracurricular practices spend a lot of

time working hard to position themselves within sites, to learn the codes and conventions, to make connections with other participants, and to practice their reading and writing habits. Still, literacy and composition scholars can recognize that improving writing skills is a secondary benefit of participating in extracurricular sites of literacy like fan fiction communities. What I hope to reinforce is the potential for many sites in Web 2.0 to host critical literacy practices that can and should inform composition pedagogy and research. Incorporating students' everyday lives and literacy experiences into our pedagogies can help students to be more engaged in the classroom, as they see their experiences reflected back to them, and hone their critical literacy skills as they traverse multiple sites of literacy across the curriculum and extracurriculum. Furthermore, allowing students' full range of literacy practices into the classroom can create a bridge between the composition classroom and the extracurriculum, provide opportunities for students to position themselves as experts based on their experiences in out-of-school literacy sites, and facilitate conversations about how students negotiate the codes and conventions across different sites of literacy. Ultimately, these conversations can help students develop critical awareness that can in turn help them contribute to the social and material conditions of the sites they inhabit.

### **Research Questions and Contributions to the Field of Composition**

My decision to examine online fanfic spaces is a response to the social movements in literacy and composition that call for more inclusive theories, methodologies, and pedagogies focused on students' everyday lives. Rather than see students' online practices as disruptive or otherwise inconsequential, advocates (see Alvermann; Gee, *Video Games*; Steinkuehler; Black, *Adolescents*) argue for the need to advance our understanding of composing processes if we ourselves aim to remain relevant sponsors of literacy.

The following primary research questions drive my study:

- How do the two sponsors of literacy recruit, enable, regulate, and suppress literacy?
- How are participants interactively and reflexively positioned within the two sites of literacy?

- How are individual participants allowed to contribute to or otherwise reshape the writing ideology in each site?
- What factors do participants consider when deciding in what site to participate?

These questions serve both general and specific purposes. First, they emphasize the presence of sponsorship in the digital extracurriculum, from the site owners to the organizers of sub-communities to the advertisers to the participants themselves. Second, they reveal the potential for the extracurriculum to yield further understanding of literacy sponsorship, especially through the process of rigorously (re)defining the terms central to Brandt's framework within the context of Web 2.0 and thinking about how sponsorship can be used not to just to assess the economic aspects of literacy but also the social aspects. Third, they help bring into focus the conditions and incentives provided by the sites that compel participants to participate—that is, to position themselves within the community and to take up (or not) the associated rights and responsibilities, and contribute their time and energy to the development of their own literacy practices as well as the practices of others. Finally, these primary research questions, along with the secondary questions I discuss in Chapter Three, reveal the triad relationship among literacy sponsorship, positioning, and writing ideology within online fan fiction communities.

Furthermore, my aim is to focus on the literacy practices of college students in particular. Despite calls (Howe and Strauss; Madden and Jones; Jones; Rheingold) for a much more sustained research focus on college-age students, college students remain an under-researched demographic (Wilber; Jones). This dissertation, then, attempts to fill this gap in research and to encourage more qualitative studies that ask students to articulate their broad range of literacy experiences.

In Chapter Two, I situate this project in interdisciplinary conversations about fans and fan practices by providing a review of the existing scholarship on fan fiction and noting the gaps that exist, such as a lack of attention paid to college students who write fan fiction, any kind of comparative analysis across different fan fiction sites, and conversations about the potential contributions of research of fan fiction for the field of composition. In Chapter Three, I (re)articulate my research questions and describe the

processes of data collection and data analyses, including my use of grounded theory and positioning theory as methods of discursive analysis to interrogate the two sites of literacy as well as participants' responses to interview questions. I introduce the six study participants and also provide background on the two sites of study, FanFiction.Net and LiveJournal.com, and on the source text, *House, M.D.*

Chapters Four and Five are the data chapters. In Chapter Four, I begin to describe and analyze the ways that FFN and LJ enable, recruit, regulate, and suppress literacy by examining the registration process and the process of creating profile pages and blog homepages in FFN and LJ, respectively. Approaching online fan fiction communities as sponsored sites of literacy reveals the agents present within the site, and also the power each agent has (or not) in reinforcing, rejecting, or reshaping the ideology. For instance, the processes of registering and then creating profile pages help participants adhere to the codes of conduct dictated by the sites—such as being reflective about one's own reading and writing practices while also participating in others' practices—and also provide participants room to negotiate definitions of authorship, feedback, and so forth according to their own values and beliefs and to have agency in developing their own ethos as fan fiction participants. The practices authors take upon themselves to promote, like posting preferences for romantic pairings on the profile page as well as in the Author's Note, can preclude hostile interactions that come from readers being surprised by an author's creative interpretation of a text and can, in turn, facilitate the kind of constructive interaction that FFN and LJ encourages.

In addition to examining the registration process and profile pages, I also examine the roles available to participants and the associated rights and responsibilities that aim to reinforce or reshape circulating ideologies. Positioning theory reveals these pages as “autobiographical aspects” of an ongoing “story line” in which it “becomes possible to find out how each conversant conceives of themselves and of the other participants by seeing what position they take up and in what story, and how they are then positioned” (Harré and Davies 262). Thus, positioning theory also reveals how essential these pages, overlooked in literacy scholarship, are to helping participants situate themselves and to promoting particular writing practices such as reflection and interaction. The field of composition can benefit from examining how participants are interactively and

reflexively positioned in various sites of literacy and how, for instance, reflection is connected to other literacy practices.

In Chapter Five, I continue to describe and analyze the ways that writing ideologies particular to each site are articulated and circulated, this time by looking more closely at the roles of reviewers and beta readers and the process of providing feedback. I examine the beta reader profile pages as well as the conversations between readers and authors about their stories. In their exchanges with one another (as well as in their interviews with me), participants reveal their own beliefs and values regarding what constitutes “good” writing as well as “good” feedback within these sites. My discussion of betas, feedback, and participants’ attitudes and dispositions toward feedback is a key transfer point for the composition classroom, and I argue that extracurricular sites like those devoted to fan fiction have much to teach instructors about becoming sponsors of feedback and encouraging peer sponsorship.

Throughout the dissertation, I make connections between my findings and composition pedagogy. However, in Chapter Six I focus entirely on the value of this research for pedagogy. In that chapter, I transition from literacy sponsorship as a theoretical framework to literacy sponsorship as a pedagogical framework and reinforce the value of recognizing students’ extracurricular literacy practices. I use the Council of Writing Program Administrators’ Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing to demonstrate the habits of mind and outcomes these study participants develop beyond the walls of the classroom and to argue for making more explicit the sponsors and writing ideologies present within the composition classroom. I then suggest ways that instructors can utilize a framework of sponsorship as well as positioning theory in their discussions with students about their literacy experiences in the extracurriculum and describe how those conversations can reveal, again, the prior understandings of reading and writing that inform students’ practices within the curriculum. Asking students to reflect on their experiences in the extracurriculum—for instance, what roles are available to them or what beliefs about writing get circulated within particular sites of literacy and if and how they see themselves transferring or rejecting beliefs and values as they traverse across sites—can help students be more critical literacy participants. Literacy sponsorship and positioning theory can frame those conversations, providing students and instructors with

the tools and vocabulary to examine students' practices in various sites of literacy. Learning to see sites of literacy, including the composition classroom, as sponsors of literacy and understanding the power dynamics within can advance composition theory and pedagogy and empower students.

While scholars must be cautious in assuming that what we learn from out-of-class experiences can be easily transferred to the classroom, examining these extracurricular sponsored spaces and the meta-conversations that occur within them not only recognizes students' literacy experiences beyond the classroom, but also fosters more opportunities to prepare student writers to creatively and critically engage in various literacy situations. My aim in this dissertation is not to study fan fiction spaces for the sake of themselves, though certainly a secondary contribution of this project is to further our understanding and appreciation of the rich practices of fans. Rather, I use fan fiction sites as a means to an end: by locating literacy sponsors in the extracurriculum and studying the ways in which they enable and constrain literacy practices, I argue that we can in turn create relevant, inclusive, and critical pedagogies that draw on students' literacy experiences outside of the classroom to better prepare them for participation in a variety of literacy situations. Inherent in this argument is an endorsement of an ethnographic approach to teaching writing that teaches students how to study the particular sponsored spaces they inhabit. Such an approach is not new; twenty years ago scholars like Reither argued that by turning the classroom into a knowledge-making community, instructors can give students the opportunity to do what Polanyi describes as "indwelling" in an actual academic knowledge community—that is, learning from an insider's point of view its major questions, governing assumptions, language, research methods, evidential contexts, forms, discourse conventions, major authors and major texts and, I would add, its sponsors. Only this kind of immersion, Polanyi argues, has a real chance of giving substance to their coming to know through composing (625). I argue that we need to more vigorously take up this approach, especially given the increasing amount of time our students spend traversing across varied and increasingly complex discourse communities.

Picking up where Brandt leaves off, I suggest ways the composition classroom can itself function as a sponsor of literacy. A framework of sponsorship can help students

ask questions when they enter into new sites or even as they re-enter in an effort to (re)position themselves or to think more critically about the site: for instance, questions about the participants, about the sponsors who dictate the codes and conventions of a site, how they might position themselves in relation to others within the site, the power relations present within the site, and other questions that help them think about the social and material conditions that inform their identities and practices. A composition classroom attentive to questions generated by sponsorship would itself be a sponsor of literacy: one that attends to students' everyday lives, identities, and practices in an effort to better prepare them to position themselves in whatever literacy situation they find themselves.

Exploring why students participate in the digital extracurriculum can help us understand what conditions create satisfying literacy experiences—information that can help us create more satisfying conditions within the classroom, even as we resist hijacking those practices and in the process rendering them meaningless. For the participants in my study, there are real purposes to reading and writing in the extracurriculum: to enact identities, to create connections with other participants, to pay homage to the shared pop culture text, to boost the overall image of fans, and to cultivate “good” writing practices. Certainly one of the pitfalls of studying “new” literacy practices is romanticizing them. I resist inflating the level of writing or the depth of discussion that occurs within fan fiction; these sites are far from perfect, and I discuss the participants' criticisms of them as well. But it is false to assume that the opportunities for writing are diminishing (as Lunsford also argues) and, furthermore, it is a disservice to immediately dismiss users' efforts to adapt to these emerging opportunities as somehow not interesting or not worthy of our attention. I illustrate that our students are often engaging in conversations about their writing in rich and meaningful ways beyond the classroom and that we can learn from their motivations to participate in these conversations that get them thinking critically about their literacy activities across literacy sites. Like the living rooms, community centers, and churches that Gere describes, fanfic sites serve as extracurricular sites of literacy, and we would do well to “listen to the signals that come through the walls of our classrooms from the world outside” (“Kitchen” 76).

## CHAPTER TWO

### FANS, FAN FICTION, AND LITERACY SPONSORSHIP: A LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Introduction

In this chapter, I provide a discussion of fans and the evolving practice known as fan fiction, pointing to the gaps in the literature and the potential opportunities for continued research. Scholarship on fan fiction has tended to focus on its history, including its literary roots as well as its marginalization by the dominant culture (see Bacon-Smith; Fiske; Lewis; Jenkins; Penley; Pugh; Buske and Helleckson) and the increasing popularity of controversial genres like *slash* (see Kustritz; Scodari; Bury) and erotica (Cumberland).<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, fan fiction scholarship typically focuses on young adolescents or adult women; there is little research on college-aged fan fiction writers, (see Parrish) and I could find no qualitative studies discussing this topic. Indeed, there are few qualitative studies that focus on fan fiction in general; as Rebecca Black notes, in spite of the prominence of school-age fans' literacy and social practices surrounding online fan fiction and widespread dissemination on the Web, they “remain largely unexplored in academic research” (*Adolescents* xiv). This dissertation project aims to illustrate the potential directions and intersections for scholarship in fan fiction as well as composition studies. Throughout my review of scholarship on fan culture, I define key terms that are being introduced or (re)defined as the historical practice of fan fiction has transitioned almost entirely to the Internet. The Internet has transformed these practices

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<sup>5</sup> According to Wikipedia, *slash* can be defined as “a subgenre of romance fan fiction that exclusively deals in homosexual relationships” or as “a subgenre of Alternative Pairing that addresses a romantic relationship between characters of the same gender, especially males”—that is, authors take characters who are depicted in the source text as heterosexual and put them in a homosexual relationship or situation. The expression *slash* emerged in the late 1970s, when the “/” symbol began to be used to designate a romantic relationship between *Star Trek* characters, especially between Kirk and Spock (Kirk/Spock). Stories with male homosexual pairings are most common; fan fiction stories that put heterosexual characters in lesbian relationships are often referred to as “femslash” or “femmeslash” to distinguish them from the male/male pairing stories.

as participants have more access to texts, tools, and other fans than ever before. The transition has also made fan fiction much more visible and vulnerable to outside criticism—and scholars like Jenkins argue that this criticism has stymied scholarly efforts to recognize the richness and complexity of fan fiction and fan fiction communities (see *Textual* and *Convergence*). By providing a brief history of fan fiction and contemporary attitudes toward the practice, I aim to articulate how fan fiction is positioned by outsiders and how, in response, sponsors of fan fiction sites attempt to establish writing environments that not only support fans’ innovative practices, but also (re)position them as legitimate and mindful cultural producers who contribute to the discourse surrounding pop culture texts like *House, M.D.* as well as to the discourse about reading and writing in the digital age.

In the second section of this chapter, I provide a review of the scholarship on literacy sponsorship. Since Deborah Brandt’s groundbreaking book *Literacy in American Lives* in 2001, there have been few attempts to take up the term “literacy of sponsorship” in either the field of literacy or composition studies, yet I begin to argue in this chapter that it remains relevant in the era of Web 2.0, and has more pedagogical implications than Brandt herself indicates. Ultimately, I argue that the ongoing efforts to legitimize and also complicate fan culture and its practices, including fan fiction, can open the door to composition instructors acknowledging students’ extracurricular literacy practices and inviting into the classroom conversations about their motivations for joining alternative writing communities, their experiences across various writing communities, and ways that the composition classroom might better serve their needs.

### **Fans, Fandoms, and Fan Fiction**

Historically, there have been a number of obstacles that have prevented scholars from taking seriously the practices of fans and fan fiction writers. In this section, I describe how, in the past three decades, scholars in a variety of fields have begun to unpack the terms *fan*, *fandom*, and *fan fiction* in an effort to legitimize the identities and practices bound up in the consumption, production, and distribution of an increasingly participatory popular culture.

*Fan* and *fandom* are terms central to fan and media studies but are complicated to define because they are constantly shifting as access to texts increase and as new tools are introduced that usher in new practices. While a fan can be broadly characterized as an enthusiastic follower of a sport or entertainment or an enthusiastic admirer, composition scholar Juli Parrish cautions scholars from using this term either too inclusively or exclusively. She argues for a distinction between fans and *fans*—that is, between those casual consumers and those who develop an extensive knowledge of a particular pop culture text and who then contribute to the discourse, who make the transition from consumer to producer. As she explains, *fandoms* have generally been understood as subcultures motivated by, and organized around, collective interest in particular media texts. But such broad definitions can be unproductive—and dated. David Bell argues that the term *subculture*, in the age of the Internet, should be reserved for those groups of people who use computer technology to “subvert in some way dominant social norms or dominant formations of what technology is for”; thus computer hackers, not media fans, are truly “subcultural” in the Internet context (163). Furthermore, broad definitions can lead to overgeneralization. For example, in my online search for definitions of fans and fandoms, I came across “R.M.,” who identifies himself as a fan and who defines *fandom* as “the state of being a fan or all that encompasses fan culture and fan behavior in general, or the study of fans and fan behavior.” This definition seems rather liberal, failing to capture the nuances of fannish identities and practices, including this rather incomplete list of fans and *fans*: casual fans (those who merely watch a particular show or read a book or comic series); those more avid fans who further engage by posting to message boards, gathering with other fans to watch shows together or to attend media events for the text, or routinely read gossip blogs; fanfic writers and vidders, who create stories and videos related to the text; and those so-called academic fans or “aca-fans” who have emerged in the past decade and who reveal their involvement and investment in the fan communities they study (see Kustritz; Jenkins, “Will”).

Increasingly, recent scholarship aims to complicate the definitions of fans and fandoms in an effort to resist this kind of overgeneralization that can have potentially detrimental effects. Jenkins attempts to recast “Trekkies” not as freakish or cultish but rather as comprising an “alternative social community” with rich social and literacy

practices they use to productively contribute to the discourse of *Star Trek* (*Textual 2*). Colin Lankshear and Michele Knobel give attention to adolescent girls' increasing participation in the production, distribution, and consumption of fan 'zines<sup>6</sup> and re-cast this historical literacy practice as an example of adolescents' creative, critical, and gendered engagement in popular culture (*New*). Such rehabilitation of identities and practices creates space for deeper explorations into fan cultures. As the descriptions I provide suggest, enthusiasm for texts can inspire various practices, and the distinctions can be important to fans, critics, authors and other cultural producers. John Fiske explains that fans discriminate and distinguish sharply between what belongs in fandom and what does not, what is "fannish" behavior and what is not, and what is quality pop culture and what is not ("Cultural"). He outlines three separate kinds of productivity and participation: (1) *semiotic*, which pertains to the way fans "make meaning" or decide on the meaning of texts for themselves as individuals; (2) *enunciative*, which refers to "fan talk" or the construction of fan lingo that creates and defines community while simultaneously excluding others from it; and (3) *textual*, which corresponds to fan-circulated media, including fan fiction, videos, and comics. In the hierarchy of fandom, those who not only consume but also produce texts can be recognized as *fans*, to borrow Parrish's distinction. The stakes can be high in delineating among fans, *fans*, and "casual" audience members. Those fans who participate in enunciative and textual practices might perceive themselves as more invested in, loyal to, and knowledgeable about a text; likewise, critics, authors, and cultural producers might perceive these avid fans as threatening—that is, capable of violating the integrity of the "original" text or the rights of the "original" producer.<sup>7</sup> Fiske explains that in their "polysemic" or "many-signed" analysis of a text in which there are several possible meanings depending on the ways in which its constituent signs are read, fans "construct alternative readings and

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<sup>6</sup> *Zine* is an abbreviation of *fanzine*, or *magazine*. It is most commonly a small circulation publication of original or appropriated texts and images. More broadly, the term encompasses any self-published work of minority interest usually reproduced via photocopier on a variety of colored paper stock. Topics covered include fan fiction, politics, art and design, ephemera, personal journals, or a single topic obsession. Small circulation zines are often not explicitly copyrighted, and there is a strong belief among many 'zine creators that the material within should be freely distributed. Print remains the most popular format, though in recent years a number of 'zines have found online distribution.

<sup>7</sup> I use the term "producer" to encompass authors, screenwriters, television writers and other kinds of creators of media.

interpretations of such texts” and thereby distinguish themselves from “normal” audiences (*Understanding* 12). Fiske’s description of fan practices is interesting because while he acknowledges the complex relationships *fans* have with texts, he also reinforces the perception of *fans* as not “normal.” Indeed, his theorizations of fans have simultaneously positioned them as intellectual and threatening. As Fiske explains, fan culture—specifically those fans who engage in enunciative or textual practices—violates the “disciplinary distance between text and reader” that is policed by the dominant culture (*Understanding* 41). Both Fiske’s and Jenkins’s groundbreaking work on fan cultures has simultaneously elevated and diminished the popular perception of fandoms: on one hand, they reveal the complexity and creativity of the practices; on the other hand, they contribute to the general pathologizing and marginalizing of fans. Fiske describes fandoms as typically made up of “the socially and culturally deprived” (*Understanding* 33), and Alison Peirse argues that despite his pivotal role in legitimizing fan culture, Jenkins “continues to assert that fandom is a subordinate social formation, populated by the oppressed” (100).

To be sure, the move to the Internet has made fans and their practices more visible, and this visibility has prompted pro- and anti-fanfic sentiments—sometimes in the same breath—from television networks, authors, corporate sponsors, and academics. The derogatory response to fan cultures can range from romanticization to ridicule. Ridicule is not a new response: historically, fans have been cast by authors, the media, and the academy as somehow inconsequential, oppressed, unhealthy, harmful, or deprived—or, of course, “fanatical,” meant in the most derogatory sense. The Internet allows fans faster and easier access to texts, resources, technologies, and audiences, and this access in turn reshapes their agency. Thus, with the increase in visibility has come increased concern regarding disciplinary distance. For example, some authors warn fan fiction writers away from working with material over which they claim ownership. On her official website, author Anne Rice offers this warning to fans who might consider crossing the line from consumers to (re)producers of her work:

I do not allow fan fiction.

The characters are copyrighted. It upsets me terribly to even think about fan fiction with my characters. I advise my readers to write your own original stories with your own characters.

It is absolutely essential that you respect my wishes.

For many producers, fan fiction disrupts traditional concepts such as *authorship*, *copyright*, and *originality*, and Rice is clearly responding to this disruption. Her language—“allow,” “copyrighted,” “my characters,” “your own characters”—reinforces her sense of ownership over her material and her anxiety toward fans whose enunciative and textual efforts might violate that disciplinary distance between text and reader that Fiske describes. Madeline Ashby notes that there are few copyright holders who have spoken out against fan fiction, but that their complaints are vehement and numerous. She explains:

Prose fiction authors like Robin Hobb and Lee Goldberg argue that fan fiction writers are stealing their original characters when writing their own stories. They frequently liken fan fiction and the violation of copyright and intellectual property law to physical theft, or to a physical—perhaps even sexual—assault on characters who feel like friends and family. (1.1)

Hobbs’ and Goldberg’s criticism of fan fiction—comparing it to theft and assault—might seem extreme. The comparison to sexual assault is likely a response to the sub-genres of slash and erotica, where fan fiction writers take characters and put them in sexual situations the author did not intend for them and, in the process, violate the essence of the source text. Ultimately, their criticism speaks to serious matters beyond feeling offended by fanfic authors’ creative interpretations of texts—matters related to copyright and intellectual property law, which have become particularly complicated in the digital age when access to texts and tools have made it easy for fans to “remix” or “mash-up” other people’s texts to create new texts. Fan fiction has challenged how countries define and protect copyright.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> These are global conversations, and laws in one country can affect the fans’ practices in another country. For example, in 2009 the Australian government announced that it would be proceeding with legislation to introduce an Internet filter aimed at blocking access to material such as sexual abuse imagery, bestiality, sexual violence, and violence or drug use. However, Australian researcher Mark McLelland notes that a report by Australian media scholars “pointed to a number of gray areas that might lead to censorship creep and vastly increase the number of sites that could end up on the government’s blacklist,” potentially blocking access to thousands of anime, comics, gaming, and slash fan fiction sites. Such a move to censor fan fiction could cripple the conversations and practices occurring in sites like FFN and LJ that host fans from all over the world. In response to this report, Jenkins notes that “fans need to understand how local, national, and international laws may impact their writing practices,” particularly within an increasingly globalized fan culture (“Will”).

That fan fiction writers violate copyright has been an enduring complaint. As I note in Chapter One, several scholars (Jenkins; Cumberland; Pugh) claim that fan fiction dates back to the thirteenth century and to early literary parodies and sequels such as Lydgate's *Siege of Thebes* (a continuation of *The Canterbury Tales*) or the many "metanovels" that have been written as sequels to such works as Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, Conan-Doyle's *Sherlock Holmes*, or Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. This attempt to locate fan fiction within a rich and historical literary practice is, in part, an attempt to legitimize it and to otherwise protect it from those critics who argue that it has little literary or social worth. Yet Parrish notes, as she does with the term *fan*, that attempting to offer a stable definition of *fan fiction* can be counterproductive: definitions that are too exclusive run the risk of dismissing vital and relevant practices while those that are too inclusive or "overly elastic" (12) might ultimately include the entire Shakespeare corpus and, essentially, deprive the practice of its uniqueness. She explains:

while a number of studies have argued persuasively that fan fiction has its roots in fan-written contributions to the 1920's periodical *Amazing Stories* (Coppa), in anonymous and sometimes plagiarized magazine stories of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Duncombe), in 19<sup>th</sup> century sensational novels (Pflieger, Pearson), or in the collective oral storytelling traditions dating back to Ovid (Aden), very few critics would agree that any fiction based on pre-existing work qualifies as fan fiction *per se*. (12)

Other definitions also fall short and reinforce the dubious perception of fans by others. For instance, Angela Thomas's definition attempts to undermine early descriptions of fans as "textual poachers" (see Jenkins, *Textual*) but also reinforces the notion that fans' texts are somehow less "real" than what Jenkins calls "the collective meta-text" they use as inspiration:

[b]orrowing settings, plots, characters and ideas from all forms of media and popular culture, fans weave together new tales, sometimes within the accepted canon (the real works from which they are borrowing), sometimes blending several ideas from different stories (i.e. *Star Wars* meets Middle Earth) together in a type of fiction called "Crossovers," and sometimes imagining new possibilities for additional characters, different histories or different settings to build on existing stories, called "Alternate Universe" fiction. (147)

Again, this description seems to at once elevate and diminish fans and their practices. Thomas's definition acknowledges the practices specific to fans—like the intertextual practices of Crossovers and Alternate Universe—and also discredits them by categorizing the canonical texts (*Star Wars*) as “real” and, one could interpret, fan fiction texts as fake or otherwise fraudulent. This move exemplifies the progress fan fiction scholars have made in elevating the practice and also how easy it is to undercut that progress and perpetuate the reputation of fan fiction as a dubious practice.

Rebecca Black's definition is worth quoting at length, for she moves closer to an inclusive description of the evolving practice of fanfic:

Fan fictions are fan-created texts that are based on forms of popular culture such as books, movies, television, music, sports, and video games. Though such texts are derivative in the sense that they depict available images of popular culture, I argue that fans producing these fictions are far from being ‘mindless consumers’ and reproducers of existing media, as they actively engage with, rework, and appropriate the ideological messages and materials of the original text. (*Adolescents* xiii)

Her argument that fanfic writers draw on available media to engage in a wide range of innovative and sophisticated literate practices, such as creating robust characterizations, developing new histories for characters, and generating alternate settings and plotlines that are not present in the original media, serves to endorse fannish practices as well as identities. However, the term “original” is complicated, for it again suggests that fanfic is *not* original and, moreover, reinforces a kind of hierarchy that diminishes fans' practices.

Going forward, I suggest we—and I mean fans, critics, producers, and aca-fans—continue re-defining fan fiction, working toward a definition that preserves the “original” text while also acknowledging the “original” efforts of fans. Fans themselves recognize that they do not “own” the characters they are working with; it is standard convention that fanfic authors acknowledge at the beginning of each story they post that they are working with other people's material. As they often state, they do not “own” the material. They take existing material and use their own ideas and insight to create new material. Thus, this question of originality remains more complicated than even Black's solid definition might indicate. I suggest exchanging “original” with “source text”—a term that

acknowledges that the work is inspired by an existing work but also gives fan fiction authors credit for their own original contributions.<sup>9</sup>

I do not mean to belabor this point concerning semantics, but it is essential that scholars continue to unpack terms like “real” or “original” when describing fanfic in order to not further reduce the composing processes of fanfic writers or reinforce critics’ perceptions that fanfic somehow threatens the integrity of the work of other authors and producers. Likewise, it seems important for fan fiction writers to respect the wishes of producers like Rice who ask that they maintain a respectful distance from the texts. Furthermore, these conversations concerning authorship and originality are important to this dissertation because they can influence instructors’ attitudes toward extracurricular literacy practices like fan fiction—leading them, for example, to see the practices as distracting, inconsequential, or even threatening. Such dismissal means that instructors may overlook the ways students negotiate the very tensions that I have outlined in this section: how they understand authorship, how they invent within the opportunities and constraints afforded by copyright and the Internet, and how they understand concepts such as originality and collaboration across various sites of literacy. In the following section, I further discuss the implications of studying fan fiction for the fields of literacy and composition.

### **Fan Fiction and Composition Studies**

Current scholarship (Jenkins; Black; Parrish; Thompson) aims to depict fans and fan fiction practices as compelling and important objects of study. Yet as I note in Chapter One, few empirical studies have been conducted on fan fiction (Black, *Adolescents*) and even fewer have come out of the field of composition (Parrish; Roozen) that would contribute to these scholarly endeavors. Black’s qualitative study on English language learners’ participation in online fan fiction sites offers the most comprehensive look at how fan fiction might inform education studies. She argues that while literacy researchers have applied spatial lenses to their research as a means of understanding the

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<sup>9</sup> This is a necessarily abbreviated conversation given that I do not have the time or space to delve into the legal, intellectual, and moral complexities involved in the ongoing efforts to define “original” and, accordingly, copyright. My aim, rather, is to highlight some of the tensions inherent in fan fiction and to urge scholars, fans, and the legal community to continue discussing these issues.

role of language and literacy in the discursive, relational, and dynamic processes of constructing in- and out-of-school spaces (Gutierrez; Rymes and Larson; Leander and Sheehy), save for a few studies (Gee, *Situated*; Steinkuehler and Williams), such lenses have seldom been applied to literacy practices in popular online spaces. Her work is particularly significant in promoting better understanding of the needs of English language learners (ELLs). Many ELLs who participate in online fan fiction communities find them kinder and more constructive learning environments compared to classrooms. In these online communities, participants often offer gentle critique in an effort to help with not only content but also grammar and style. Furthermore, to be bi-lingual in these writing communities is to be at an advantage rather than a disadvantage, as is so often the case in the classroom. In these communities, to be bi-lingual is to interact with a text in more than one language and in more than one culture, resulting in a deeper engagement that other participants recognize and appreciate.

Mary Thompson's empirical study focuses on what Margaret Finders calls adolescent girls' "hidden literacies"—those nonacademic forms of literacy that establish and maintain group affiliations and hierarchies, including reading teen magazines and scribbling on bathroom walls in an effort to demonstrate nonconformity and to resist the institutions in which they must participate. Thompson focuses on those hidden literacies of immigrant adolescent girls involved in anime who use their shared knowledge of the anime series *Inuyasha Central* to create complex stories centered on their own lives in relation to the characters. Like Black, Thompson focuses on the experiences of ELLs, and she notes that the skills of creating complex characters through original anime text are often not sanctioned by the discourse of schooling; rather, the girls are positioned as reluctant readers and writers both because of their immigrant status and because they keep hidden their extracurricular literacies. As she explains, the girls often talk of wanting to be seen differently in school, but are not sure how to change their teachers' perspectives. And while they want to be recognized as capable students inside the context of school, they are reluctant to share their fan fiction identities for fear their teachers will misunderstand or misappropriate their knowledge and practices.

Thompson's work is important for a number of reasons: first, it highlights the disconnect between students' in-school and out-of-school literacy practices and identities

and the consequences of that disconnect, while also reinforcing the value of a curriculum that recognizes out-of-school literacies and identities. Furthermore, it echoes much of the literature (see Moje, “Story”; Gee, *Video Games*; Moje and Lewis) that notes whose literacies and identities get recognized and whose get ignored and, subsequently, why students might go looking for literacies and identities beyond the classroom.

Second, what is particularly useful about her work is her use of positioning theory (Harré; Davies and Harré; Harré and van Langenhove; Harré and Moghaddam; Harré and Slocum; McVee et al.) to study how her participants try to “be” the characters in their anime worlds while at the same time maintaining a parallel identity of who they are in the real world. As such, her research advances James Gee’s theories of “tripartite identities” and the interplay between the real and virtual identities, as well as reflects on the position of the researcher in relation to the subjects’ various identities. Thompson’s study is the first published study to pair fanfic and positioning theory, and opens up opportunities as well to think about how participants within sites of literacy are reflexively and interactively positioned, and the implications of that positioning on the identities and practices. Finally, what is also important about Thompson’s work is that she relies not only on her own observations of *Inuyasha Central* but also on interviews with the study participants, thereby giving them the opportunity to voice their own experiences. As I explain in Chapter Three, I determined at the start of my study that it was as important for participants to describe their practices as it was to observe them in action. Like Black and Thompson, I chose not only to observe but also to interact with the participants. I argue that if scholars and instructors want to learn more about fan fiction, they must converse with those who participate in it—and that doing so can deepen our understanding of participants’ motivations for joining these sites and help reveal why they are compelling sites of literacy. This method reinforces my interest in developing opportunities for student writers to be meta-cognitive about their literacy practices in and out of the classroom, a pedagogical implication of this research that I pursue throughout this dissertation.

Thompson’s work is geared toward middle school and high school instructors, and as such is interesting if not wholly relevant to those instructors who teach college composition. Juli Parrish, however, presents her scholarship to a composition audience.

Echoing Gere (“Kitchen”), Bawarshi, Lunsford, and other composition scholars who advocate for better understanding students’ writing in the extracurriculum, Parrish encourages composition instructors to view fan fiction texts and communities as “powerful reminders that the writing instruction we do is only one universe; it exists in a much larger network of alternate writing communities” (172), many of which offer instruction just as compelling if not more so than the instruction that occurs within the classroom. In her study of the fan fiction site *Different Colored Pens*, she suggests ways that composition studies can benefit from fan fiction by observing the beta reading process and the more general ways participants ask for and receive feedback. Whereas Black argues for seeing fan fiction communities as *affinity groups*, Parrish argues that the term *discourse community* is an established as well as organic way of viewing fan fiction communities when it comes to comparing them to composition classrooms. I have also chosen to use this concept as well as the concept of sponsored sites of literacy, as it reflects current conversations and dispositions within the field of composition.

Parrish’s study involves observation over an extended period of time. However, she does not opt to interview or otherwise interact with the participants in the site. There are other differences between my empirical study and those that have preceded it—differences that I hope will foster inter-disciplinary appreciation of fan fiction and promote more research of fannish practices from within the field of composition studies. For instance, Thompson, Black, and Parrish each examine one single fan site, which affords the opportunity for deep analysis. However, I examine two different sites, FanFiction.Net and LiveJournal.com, convinced that it is crucial to begin conducting more cross-comparison analyses that might help us better determine how students decide what sites among many in which they want to participate. Such comparisons can open up opportunities to closely examine the social and material conditions of certain sites of literacy and to determine, through observations as well as interviews with site participants, what conditions do and do not appeal to them, and how these conditions differ from their other sites of literacy, including the classroom.

To be sure, there is much for composition studies to learn from the evolution of fan literacy practices, given that more and more students are plugging in and logging on and disrupting, as I have already noted, traditional notions of authorship, originality,

collaboration, and text. Furthermore, the Internet has altered the demographics of fanfic sites, making them all the more relevant to those who study the extracurricular literacy practices of adolescents and college students. Kristina Busse and Karen Hellekson explain that “ever-younger fans who previously would not have had access to the fannish culture except through their parents can now enter the fan space effortlessly” (13). Black explains that the demographics of fan fiction have shifted from a majority of adults producing hard-copy print zines to “large numbers of tech-savvy adolescents who are writing and publishing fics on fan and personal Web sites as well as in online archives” (*Adolescents* 11). Black and Steinkuehler reason that the sheer number of fan fiction texts makes it a difficult phenomenon to overlook and that education and literacy researchers should be particularly interested because so much of this fiction is being produced and consumed by adolescents. For literacy and composition educators, the fact that so many fanfic activities, such as collaborative writing, revising, and writer/reader interaction, on sites like FanFiction.Net and LiveJournal.com are consonant with the practices promoted in classrooms makes these sites even more compelling to examine. Moreover, students in these sites seem to willingly and quite enthusiastically engage in these practices—practices that so often fail to engage them in the classroom. Given that I focus only on participants’ time in online fan fiction sites and not on their time in the classroom, I must temper any fan fiction-versus-classroom comparisons I might make. But I join other scholars in arguing that these practices require time and commitment, and it is worth investigating the conditions in these emerging communities that encourage such time and commitment from participants.

Another benefit to studying the digital extracurriculum and fan fiction in particular is the potential for advancing conversations about genre. In fanfic communities, genres reign supreme: participants are expected to identify themselves according to their favorite romantic pairings and their generic preferences and to adhere to the conventions of those genres. In this sense, genres serve to structure identities and practices and, as I argue in Chapter Five, also uphold standards for “good” writing. Fan fiction sites require that participants understand “newly blended genres and representational codes” (Luke 73) not only to compose texts, but also to successfully read and provide feedback; as such, they provide fertile ground for continuing to advance

genre studies in the field of composition and the ways in which sites do and do not help participants situate themselves within the various genres at work.

Still, scholars argue that *genre* is a term and concept that needs to continue to be redefined within the contexts of new sites of literacy, new access to texts, and new practices. Carolyn Miller and Dawn Shepherd note that when a type of discourse or communicative action acquires a common name within a given context or a community, it is likely functioning as a genre (1451). This basic definition is productive in terms of how to recognize a genre; however, it does not hint at the complexity of defining a term that undergoes constant redefinition in order to accommodate new groups, discourses, and practices. W.C. Dimock's questions reflect this complexity:

What exactly are genres? Are they a classifying system matching the phenomenal world of objects, a sorting principle that separates oranges from apples? Or are they less than that, a taxonomy that never fully taxonomizes, labels that never quite keep things straight? What archive come with genres, what critical lexicons do they offer, and what maps do they yield? And how does the rise of digitization change these archives, lexicons, and maps? (1377)

Scholars continue to attempt to address these questions, and in the field of composition, those attempts have yielded further questions about invention and how writers position themselves within the social structures that are genres. Bawarshi in particular has influenced how I approach studying fan fiction sites. Bawarshi situates himself within the social turn composition studies has taken in the past twenty years and more specifically among the various scholars who theorize the concepts of invention and authorship, including Brodkey, LeFevre, Crowley, Ede and Lunsford, and Faigley. In his work, Bawarshi unpacks and redefines essential terms to convince us that terms like *invention* and *genre*, which of course are central to concepts like authorship and originality, have not been understood in particularly critical or productive ways. He argues that generic boundaries are not simply classificatory constraints within which writers and speakers function (which he claims is how the field of literary studies has traditionally treated genre) but rather are “social and rhetorical conditions which make possible certain commitments, relations, and actions” (9). The thrust of his work is to examine invention “as the site in which writers act within and are acted upon by the social and rhetorical conditions that we call genres—the site in which writers acquire, negotiate, and articulate

the desires to write” (7) and to offer practical ways for instructors to reveal these connections to their students. As he explains, the site of invention has been located, rather unproductively, within the mind of the writer:

The scene of origination—the beginnings of a text—that we popularly designate as invention ostensibly resides before and somehow remains immune from the social, collaborative, and discursive conditions that later affect the text’s production, circulation, and production. (4)

Fan fiction and fan fiction communities demonstrate that invention does not, in fact, exist in a vacuum; as I demonstrate in Chapters Four and Five, FanFiction.Net and LiveJournal.com are potent examples of how invention is firmly situated in the “social, collaborative, and discursive.”

Of particular significance to me have been Bawarshi’s conversations about how authors position themselves in relation to texts and genres—a potentially complicated endeavor for fan fiction authors who create new texts out of existing ones. He notes that when writers begin to write in different genres, they participate within these sets of relations that motivate them, consciously or unconsciously, to invent both their texts and themselves (17). The process of participants inventing themselves was particularly interesting to me as I examined the registration process as well as the templates provided by the two sites. Examining how students develop a sense of ethos, how they represent themselves, and how they negotiate genres can help instructors understand when and why they might stay within the boundaries of a particular genre or possibly transgress it, and how they switch subjectivities as they maneuver between multiple genres. Given that fan fiction might also be understood to function as “genred spaces” (Bazerman) wherein participants constantly negotiate generic codes and conventions, from the profile pages to the genres of the fictions they write to the genre of posted responses, it seems that exploring fan fiction can contribute to conversations about invention and genre.

The work of genre theorists has produced compelling and important conversations about both the curriculum and the extracurriculum that have informed this dissertation. Having acknowledged this influence, I have chosen to background genre in favor of using Brandt’s concept of literacy sponsorship—those sponsored sites wherein which genres serve as a way to recruit, enable, regulate, and suppress participants and practices. Thus, I draw on the work of genre theorists, especially Bawarshi, even as I argue for the

affordances of a framework of literacy sponsorship. In the next section, I provide a review of the scholarship on literacy sponsorship.

### **Literacy Sponsorship**

Few empirical studies of literacy sponsorship exist beyond Brandt's seminal work—or, at least, few studies that employ the term “sponsors of literacy.” While her work is widely referenced, there have been few attempts to create subsequent studies using sponsorship as a framework. Yet the framework remains relevant, particularly to those “scenes of literacy” (Brandt) that have emerged out of Web 2.0, where the issues of access, agency, and agenda remain intact and perhaps even more complex given just how many agents with competing agendas have access to sites of literacy. Brandt acknowledges that she stopped writing about sponsorship just as the Internet was taking off, and that the Internet has indeed generated new sponsors and new notions of sponsorship (“Personal”). She notes in *Literacy in American Lives*:

As the first genuinely digital youth generation comes into consciousness, early literacy experiences embedded in computer and Internet use undoubtedly will give that generations' literacy a different quality from that of members of older generations. (201)

Here she opens the door to pursuing the concept of literacy sponsorship in Web 2.0. R. Mark Hall argues that the framework helps theorize the relationship between literacy as an individual development and also as a broader social and economic development and provides a jumping-off point for analyzing both traditional and emerging sites of literacy. Hall applies Brandt's theory to “Oprah's Book Club,” which he identifies as a “literacy delivery system” with Winfrey as a literacy sponsor who profits from the transaction. By focusing on Winfrey, Hall demonstrates how popular culture, television, and sponsorship converge to produce new sites of literacy. Through a close reading of Winfrey and her talk show, he reveals the ways she recruits participants, noting that she “uses intimacy strategically to attract and maintain audience interest and loyalty” (652) and also how she in turn profits from this interest and loyalty. Such examination further illustrates Brandt's theory of how sponsor and sponsored alike profit from the relationship. Furthermore, Hall uses sponsorship to “read” Winfrey's power and authority to tell millions of people what and how to read and to pose questions about the power at work in this particular

sponsorship: “We must ask, then, as we examine ‘Oprah’s Book Club,’ not only what ideologies of literacy are privileged on the Oprah Winfrey Show, but which ones are ignored—and with what consequences?” (663). Hall makes some effort to nuance Brandt’s theory, offering a darker side to Winfrey’s power that suggests a negative version of the literacy sponsor—what he calls a “nonliteracy sponsor” (663)—that seems particularly productive to consider in light of the efforts by networks and celebrities to position themselves as literacy sponsors. Hall does not include student voices in his research, and he does little to consider how a framework of sponsorship might apply to the classroom beyond suggesting that “Oprah’s Book Club” has important implications for English studies, if only academics can see past the “lowbrow” talk show (664). Hall’s discussion of ideologies alongside sponsorship opens up opportunities for composition and literacy scholars to think about the ways sponsors (magazines, prisons, schools, television talk show hosts, or fan fiction sites) and sponsored (readers, prisoners, students, audiences, fan fiction participants) negotiate the rules for engagement at scenes of literacy.

To be sure, I argue that Brandt’s framework of sponsorship, ten years later, remains a compelling way to examine emerging sites of literacy generated by Web 2.0. The proliferation of online sites of literacy, however, demands a closer inspection of sponsorship, particularly the ways in which power is distributed and knowledge and skills are shared. For example, fan culture offers a complex version of sponsorship, in which the power is both top-down and also bottom-up: fanfic writers must work within the codes and conventions of not only the particular sites, but also the codes and conventions related to the source text and to the broader practice of fanfic. However, these sites would not exist without the fans, and as such the individual fans serve as sponsors for the site. In general, those websites that want to survive and thrive must allow the participants some room to invent, negotiate, and even resist. For fanfic sites, that means allowing them to take up positions, like that of beta reader, which, in accordance with positioning theory, come with certain rights and responsibilities that might include contributing to the sites’ resources and technologies in order to enhance participants’ individual agency, while maintaining a collaborative and constructive social environment.

Brandt focuses on the economies of sponsorship—examining, for instance, the relationship between literacy learning and regional economic restructuring and demonstrating how economic changes “destabilize the social and cultural trade routes over which families and communities once learned to preserve and pass on literate know-how” (42). And while we cannot completely separate the socio-economic factors that constitute a site of literacy, in this dissertation I am more interested in the social aspect of literacy in these fan fiction communities—that is, in how literacy facilitates interpersonal relationships. I argue that the framework is useful for understanding the social aspects of sponsorship.<sup>10</sup> An important part of fan fiction—from both a cultural and legal perspective—is that fan fiction authors do not typically profit financially from their literacy practices. This is not to say, however, that their literacy practices are not understood as *labor*, that they do not profit from that labor in other ways, and that they are not participating in a kind of economy. Rochelle Mazar observes that fandom

is not a money economy, but it is an economy nonetheless. It’s a complex gift economy where creative production, feedback, and critical reflection are the products and name recognition, attention, and feedback are currency.

Fan fiction is a form of *fan labor*, a term widely used to refer to the productive creative activities engaged in by fans. As Fiske notes, although fans invest significant time creating their products, and fan-created products are “often crafted with production values as high as any in the official culture” (“Cultural” 39), most fans provide their creative works for others to enjoy without receiving monetary compensation. Fans respect their *gift economy*, which in the parlance of social sciences is a society where valuable goods and services are routinely given without any explicit agreement for immediate or future rewards. This giving, ideally, serves to circulate and redistribute valuables within the community. As some fan scholars (see Fiske, “Cultural”) describe it, authors post (give) stories (gifts) and in exchange the audience reads (accepts) the story (gift) and then, perhaps, provides feedback to the author and then links or “favorites” the story for others to experience (reciprocal gift). Fan fiction authors believe that charging

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<sup>10</sup> Whether or not fan fiction writers should profit financially from their labor is an ongoing conversation. For example, in her article “Should Fan Fiction Be Free?”, Abigail De Kosnik argues that fan fiction authors, who are predominantly women, have never collectively sought payment for their labor, a situation that deserves further scrutiny.

other fans for the products of their creativity will somehow fundamentally change the fan-fan relationship as well as attract legal attention from copyright holders. Thus, social networks like FanFiction.Net and LiveJournal.com—along with the other thousands of online fan fiction communities—have sought to harness fan labor and capitalize on the cultural profits such as receiving credit, establishing a reputation, and developing relationships with other fans. My point for introducing this concept of a gift economy is two-fold: first, to illustrate that fan fiction sites can provide insight into students' motivations for participation, especially when the labor involved in these extracurricular sites of literacy is often just as rigorous as the labor involved in the classroom. For fan fiction participants, it is not about the money; it is about the social relationships they can nurture and the “gifts” they want to give one another. Second, I mean to suggest that a framework of sponsorship can offer insight into not just the economic but also *social* aspects of literacy. As new sites of literacy emerge, they demand new understandings of literacy and literacy sponsorship.

Furthermore, conversations about literacy sponsorship, including Brandt's, stop short of addressing the implications for the composition classroom. Brandt devotes her final chapter to discussing how to move forward, but does not offer explicit ways to do so in the composition classroom. And so alongside revisiting the theoretical implications, scholars should push to realize the pedagogical implications of literacy sponsorship—something I strive to do in this dissertation. Resurrecting Brandt's concept of literacy sponsorship, especially as it occurs in the digital extracurriculum, and thinking about the potential implications for the composition classroom are just some of the ways in which both theories and pedagogies rooted in literacy sponsorship can evolve.

### **Moving Forward**

In this chapter, I synthesize a number of different conversations occurring across multiple fields and disciplines. My argument for sponsorship as a framework comes out of the emerging scenes of literacy located in Web 2.0 and the calls from literacy and composition scholars to acknowledge students' everyday literacy practices. Brandt's historical examples of sponsors include printing presses, governments, teachers, magazines, churches, prisons, parents, and workplaces. I argue that online fan fiction

communities can be placed in this tradition of sponsorship—that they are culturally relevant sponsors of literacy in which literacies are recruited, enabled, regulated, and suppressed and in which writing ideologies are co-constructed and negotiated according to the needs of those agents in the site. A framework of sponsorship, with its emphasis on the power bound up in literacy, promotes the kind of critical stance Moje et al. demand, for it offers a lens for seeing how power, identities, and agency play important roles in whose social and cultural practices are valued, and whose are not (“Complex”).

Catherine Tosenberger applauds the work of aca-fans like Jenkins and their ongoing efforts to take seriously the work of fanfic writers, especially seeing fans not as passive consumers or as “deviants interacting in bizarre and unhealthy ways with inadequate texts” but rather as “belonging to a tradition of artistic innovation through explorations of pre-existing texts, both high and low” (Page Number?). Such progress is crucial in the study of fan cultures if aca-fans want to avoid reinforcing traditional hierarchies that discriminate against youth. She notes, “I think fan fictional writing has enormous liberatory potential, not just for women, but also for queer folk, young people, and anyone not plugged into the cultural elite” (Page Number?). While fanfic writers might increasingly be understood as part of the cultural elite given their abilities to traverse multiple spaces, construct sophisticated sites, and participate in a variety of discourses (e.g., digital, pop, academic), institutional attitudes toward youth’s online and pop culture practices remain skeptical, if not hostile. In this dissertation I argue that continued study of fan fiction communities has the potential to reshape attitudes toward fan culture and practices as well as composition curriculum.

## CHAPTER THREE

### RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

#### **Introduction**

In this chapter, I explain the methodology and methods behind this dissertation, including the study sites and participants; secondary research questions; data collection and analysis; and the ethics, validity, and research limitations of this project. I provide two representative sample data analyses that reveal in detail the ways I use grounded theory and positioning theory as discursive analysis to analyze the data. These sample analyses also demonstrate my use of literacy sponsorship and positioning theory as lenses for understanding how participants are interactively and reflexively positioned in the two online sites of literacy and how the participants attempt to co-construct writing ideologies. (Also, see Appendix A for a table describing the phases of my fieldwork.)

#### **Theoretical/Conceptual Frames**

As I establish in the previous chapters, principles of literacy sponsorship and positioning theory guide this examination of study participants as they socially and discursively position themselves and others in fan fiction sites and take up the associated rights, duties, and obligations (Harré and van Langenhove, “Dynamics”). Sponsors of literacy and positioning theory are the lenses with which I examine my object of study, the co-construction of fan fiction writing ideologies. I chose these lenses for several reasons. First, I am drawn to literacy sponsorship as it is articulated by Deborah Brandt because it provides a way to critically examine the power dynamics and social relationships that constitute a site of literacy, including the multiple agents and agendas present that determine the codes and conventions and the resources and technologies, all of which in turn determine who can and cannot participate in the site and to what degree. In online fan fiction communities, agents include the site managers, the commercial

backers who post their advertisements on the site, and the individual participants. Sponsorship of literacy also reveals the ways the two sites recruit, enable, regulate, and suppress (Brandt) participants' practices according to their similar yet also different fan fiction writing ideologies and the ways that participants, by introducing their own skills and knowledge to the community, attempt to co-construct those writing ideologies.

Positioning theory affords me ways of more closely examining these forms of literacy sponsorship. Through a lens of positioning theory, I not only consider what the participants and literacy sponsors do and to what end, but also how and why the participants enact various literate positions. For instance, these two frames, in tandem, ask me to consider the how sites express writing ideologies, how participants construct writing ideologies, and how participants enact or reject positions available within the site of literacy and the associated rights, duties, and obligations (Harré and van Langenhove "Dynamics"; Tan and Moghaddam).

With these frameworks in mind, I designed a qualitative study of college students who participate in online fan fiction communities in order to examine how sponsorship occurs in the extracurriculum and how it can reveal, along with positioning theory, the ways in which participants negotiate writing ideologies. Thus, the data in this study illustrate this triad among literacy sponsorship, positioning theory, and writing ideology. The next section of this chapter introduces the study sites and participants.

## **Study Sites and Participants**

### *Study Sites*

In the summer of 2008, I began considering the possible fan fiction sites to examine in this study. My initial Yahoo! search of "fan fiction" yielded 61,100,000 hits.<sup>11</sup> Not all of these hits were fan fiction sites; some linked to fanfic glossaries, quizzes, and other fannish resources and activities while others linked to books and articles about fan fiction. Many hits linked to individual fans' blogs, while others linked to public clearinghouses. Of the tens of thousands of sites, I opted to recruit participants from two

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<sup>11</sup> On March 18, 2011, that same search yielded 189,000,000 hits—a testament, again, to the "sheer number" of online fan fiction sites and texts that Black and Steinkuehler note in their rationale for studying adolescents' digital extracurricular literacy practices.

of the most popular sites that host online fan fiction: FanFiction.Net and LiveJournal.com.<sup>12</sup>

I further describe these two sites in Chapters Four and Five; for now, I offer these brief descriptions: FFN was established in 1998, and according to Wikipedia it is the single largest, most wide-ranging, and most popular online fan fiction community, in part because it is the most accessible in terms of who can join and who can post stories. I chose FFN based on its popularity and accessibility, and because it already has a place in fan fiction scholarship (see Black, *Adolescents*). Precise demographic information about FFN and its millions of participants is not available. However, it is possible to speculate on the demographics of a particular fandom within FFN by considering to whom the canon appeals. In fan fiction, *canon* is defined as the source text from which the fan fiction author borrows: *House, M.D.*, *Harry Potter*, and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* are all canons unto themselves. (Likewise, certain ideas generated by fans within a fandom that have become influential or widely accepted constitute the *fanon*.) Canons like *Star Trek* appeal to adults, and thus the stories posted within this FFN fandom are likely to be composed by adults. On the other hand, the television show *Gossip Girl* appeals to a younger age demographic, and thus it would make sense that the stories posted on FFN are likely composed by a younger audience. Other fandoms, like *House, M.D.* and *Grey's Anatomy*, have mixed demographics since the shows appeal to a broad audience. So while it is difficult to determine the demographics of the site more generally, it is possible to speculate from one fandom to another.

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<sup>12</sup> In early versions of this project, I included data I had selected from the FOX Broadcast Network's website. As I refocused the project, I opted to remove references to this site, especially since the participants in the study had rejected it for various reasons. Still, it is worth noting that FOX was the only network, at the time of publication, to host a fan fiction site for fans. FOX's increasing efforts to connect with fans—including corporatizing the historically grassroots practice of fan fiction—illustrates the Internet's facilitation of fan practices from the margin to the mainstream. Furthermore, the study participants' rejection of the site in part indicates fans' resistance to FOX's attempts to appeal to them, despite the network's privileged proximity to the source text and its ability to offer access to the show's writers and actors. Television networks' pursuit of fans merits continued attention by scholars in a variety of fields, including communication, fan studies, and literacy studies.

In FFN, stories are categorized as follows:

<b>Anime/Manga</b>	<b>Books</b>	<b>Cartoons</b>	<b>Comics</b>	<b>Games</b>
<b>Misc</b>	<b>Movie</b>	<b>Plays/Musicals</b>	<b>TV Shows</b>	

Each category is then divided into subcategories; for instance, the TV Shows category contains over 500 television shows. The shows with the most fics include *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Gilmore Girls*, *Star Trek*, *One Tree Hill*, and *House*. My aim is to contribute to and complicate contemporary understandings of this site, especially as it evolves. This evolution involves, for instance, an increasingly stricter rating system and the inclusion of new categories, such as one devoted to crossover fan fiction.<sup>13</sup> As this study reveals, these changes influence participants' interest in and commitment to the site.

In my initial observations of FFN, I noted that many FFN participants also posted their stories on other sites, including LiveJournal.com. In fact, LJ has become an increasingly popular blogging site on which many fanfic writers, including participants in this study, post their work. Thus, I chose LJ in part because it seemed popular among the participants in FFN and in part because I noted in my initial observations of the site that it allowed and accommodated different kinds of fanfic practices. Unlike FFN, LiveJournal is not a site strictly devoted to fan fiction or even to more general fan practices; fanfic is just one practice LJ supports. Established in 1999, LJ serves as a blogging and social networking site where participants can post private blogs (also called *journals*) devoted to entertainment, music, news and politics, and technology and also participate in discussion forums on topics ranging from travel to dog training. According to Wikipedia, as of March 20, 2009, 19,128,882 accounts existed on LJ. Of those users who provided their date of birth, the majority was in the 17-25 age demographic, although 29-year-olds constituted a disproportionately large group. Of those who specified gender, two-thirds were female. LJ also hosts multiple categories of fan fiction, including manga/anime,

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<sup>13</sup> According to the Wikipedia page devoted to crossover fic, "crossover fanfic occurs when either characters from one story exist in (or are transported to) another pre-existing story's world, or more commonly, characters from two or more stories interact." An example of a crossover would be taking characters from one television show and writing them into another television show. Hollywood often writes crossovers; for example, characters from one *Law & Order* show may "cross over" to star in another for one or more episodes.

cartoons, books, movies, and television shows. However, unlike FFN, it allows participants to post erotica and other kinds of fanfic that FFN had begun censoring right before I began my study. I also chose LJ as a site of study because it is mentioned frequently both in the popular press and in fan fiction discourses. For example, in its definition of *drabble* (a 100-word story with a clear beginning and end), Fanlore.org notes,

Some readers find drabbles and other very short forms to be unsatisfying and have complained that their popularity in recent years is related to an increased dependence on instant feedback since the shift from mailing lists to LiveJournal. According to this argument, authors write drabbles so that they can post frequently and receive a lot of comments, and the trend discourages them from writing the epically long fics that were common in the past.

This tension speaks to varying attitudes within fan fiction toward online communities that function as learning communities where participants do not just post their products but also post about their writing processes. That LJ in particular was implicated in this ideological shift made it an even more compelling site of study. In recent years, FFN and LJ have fought to maintain their relevance amidst the emergence of newer blogging networks such as Blogspot and Twitter.

I chose to study two sites in order to offer cross-comparison analysis across fan fiction communities and thereby extend existing scholarship that focuses on single sites (Parrish; Black; Thompson). Cross-comparison allows a deeper understanding of fanfic literacy practices, including how and why one site might enable a particular practice while another suppresses it and why many participants post stories on multiple sites or chose to work in one site versus another. Thus, having selected the two sites of study, I then began focusing on which fandom I was going to observe across the two sites and from which I would recruit study participants. In the next section, I describe that process.

*House, M.D.*<sup>14</sup>

When deciding what fanfic sub-category to observe, I had two specifications: I wanted a television show that was still on the air and one that I routinely watched. A current television show, I reasoned, would generate ongoing attention from gossip bloggers, award shows, and the host network, and would thus create a more dynamic fandom. Part of my decision to choose *House* was based on my own status as fan of this show. A show that I routinely watched would help me establish a connection with potential participants, which was particularly important given that during the period of participant observation I was going to participate in these fan communities in a limited capacity. While I actively participated in various fan practices, including watching television shows with groups of friends each week, reading celebrity gossip blogs and magazines, and talking with my composition students about pop culture, I had not participated in fan fiction beyond “lurking”—that is, reading participants’ profiles and stories but not actually posting my own, providing feedback to writers, or interacting with fans beyond those participating in the study. Thus, it was crucial that I be familiar with the source text the study participants were working with as a way to establish credibility within the group and to maintain ethical research practices.

After assessing the number of stories posted for each of the television shows listed on FanFiction.Net and with the aforementioned criteria in mind, I narrowed down the possibilities to *Grey’s Anatomy* and *House, M.D.* I chose *House* in part for its popularity among fans and fan fiction writers. As of February 1, 2008, 12,857 *House* fics had been posted on FFN—a staggering figure, especially compared to the 6,127 fics posted for its competitor, *Grey’s*.<sup>15</sup> Age demographic was also a significant factor in my selection of *House’s* fandom. I was interested in examining college students’ participation in fan fiction, and I knew that many of my own college students watched the show; I felt convinced that I would find college students in this fandom to recruit.

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<sup>14</sup> During the 2007-2008 season, *House* ranked #7 in the Nielsen ratings, with an average of 16.2 million viewers per week. It was the most-watched scripted program on television and the third most-watched program overall (behind *American Idol* and *Dancing with the Stars*). Eurodata TV Worldwide reported that the show was distributed to sixty-six countries and that in 2008 it was the most watched television program in the world.

<sup>15</sup> As of March 19, 2011, there were 19,248 *House* fics and 10,079 *Grey’s* fics. *House* remains much more popular, at least among FFN participants, despite a decline in ratings for the past two years.

Sci-fi and medical dramas are particularly popular genres among fanfic writers because they generate such rich material for fans both in terms of the relationships between characters and the very technical language that fans can play with in their writing. The particular popularity of *House* on social networks that host fanfic practices, like FFN and LJ, can be attributed to several factors. First, the show typically follows a strict formula: every episode opens with the soon-to-be patient suddenly struck by some affliction. The dramatic opening scene is followed by the credits, and then by an image of Dr. Gregory House (played by actor Hugh Laurie) and his team of specialists going over the recently admitted patient's symptoms. The show is fast-paced and predictable, moving between House's rapid-fire banter with his team and other fellow doctors and the multiple high-stakes misdiagnoses of the patient. The climax of each episode occurs during the last ten minutes—a literal “a-ha” moment for House that illustrates his enduring brilliance even after he and his team have nearly killed the patient. This formula provides basic parameters for fanfic writers, making it relatively simple to study and extend the mannerisms and rhythms of the show even as they attempt to work with the complex character of Dr. House.

Indeed, another reason for the show's popularity is that the cast is compelling—particularly the character of House, who since the show's debut has been heralded as one of the most dynamic characters on television.<sup>16</sup> He is a deeply flawed and complicated character: a doctor who is addicted to painkillers and who hates most people but who, on occasion, demonstrates compassion and vulnerability. On its page devoted to *House, M.D.*, Wikipedia further describes him:

Dealing with his own constant physical pain, he uses a cane that seems to punctuate his acerbic, brutally honest demeanor. While his behavior can border on antisocial, House is a brilliant diagnostician whose unconventional thinking and flawless instincts afford him a great deal of respect. An infectious disease specialist, he thrives on the challenge of solving medical puzzles in order to save lives.

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<sup>16</sup> Laurie is consistently nominated for lead actor awards. Other awards for the show have included a Peabody Award, two Golden Globes, and three Emmy awards.

Laurie's portrayal of House keeps the show going, even in the face of predictable plotlines.<sup>17</sup> The show is also appealing because of possibilities for romance between characters. The show's writers leave open the possibility for a variety of romantic pairings, and *shippers*—those fans who focus their attention on a particular pairing of characters and also sometimes vigorously object to other pairings—position themselves and their work according to their allegiances: House and his ex-wife, Stacy (“Houcy”); House and his boss, Cuddy (“Huddy”); House and his former team member, Allison Cameron (“Hameron”); and House and his best friend, Dr. James Wilson (“Hilson”). Huddy and Hameron are particularly popular pairings, though the show's writers have focused on cultivating the former rather than the latter.<sup>18</sup>

In the next section, I describe the process of recruiting participants from the *House* fandom.

### *Case Study Participants*

Once I determined the sites of study and the fandom, I began the process of recruiting study participants. When considering the number of participants to recruit, I weighed the affordances and limitations of including dozens of participants versus five to ten. Ultimately, I decided to collect more data on fewer participants. Privileging depth over scope meant I could spend more time developing relationships with the participants, which I hoped would yield richer data, especially from the interviews, and a higher retention rate. Longevity would allow me to follow the composing and positioning processes of the participants and to determine how the two sites of study mediated their

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<sup>17</sup> While House is a unique character, he is not entirely original: creator David Shore drew inspiration for the character of House from Sherlock Holmes. The “House and Holmes” blog lists the similarities between the doctor and the detective that extend beyond their extraordinary intelligence, including their drug habits (Vicodin and cocaine, respectively), the importance of music in their lives (Holmes plays the violin, House plays the piano), loyal sidekicks (Wilson fulfills Watson's role), and their same house address (221B). Placing House in the tradition of the revered Holmes might undermine his uniqueness, but it also provides intertextual fodder for some *House* enthusiasts, who spend their time finding similarities to other pop culture characters as well as tracking down the philosophical and literary references House routinely drops. The show is appealing because of its medical, pop culture, and literary value and is considered one of the more intellectually savvy shows on television.

<sup>18</sup> Technically, it should not matter what evidence a text offers for a given pairing; the point of fan fiction, after all, is to extend the plotlines and expand opportunities for the characters. However, by the end of the study, FlightOfFenix had “retired” from writing *House* fics, citing a lack of support from the show's writers for her preferred pairing, House and Cameron. I discuss motivations for participating (or not) throughout the dissertation.

practices. Indeed, all six participants remained in the study for the entire duration, though I will discuss later in the chapter the challenges that arose around communication and data collection. In addition to considering the ideal number of participants, I also was particular about recruiting college-age participants (18-24) and about working with students who were in college. Beyond these, I set no other preferences or restrictions—in part because I was recruiting in a space where there were not always clear indicators of race, ethnicity, and gender.

Since FFN is specifically geared toward fan fiction, I chose to recruit from this site and then to see how many participants also participated in other sites and to determine the second site of study from those findings. Rather than posting an announcement to a particular FFN community or forum devoted to *House*, which I decided would be too intrusive given my status as an outsider, I approached individual participants. I sent them emails in which I introduced myself, explained the study, and invited them to participate if they were interested. Of the 100 random profiles on FFN I browsed, I contacted thirty members who, based on the information or images they provided on their profile pages, including photos of themselves and details about the kinds of pop culture texts they were reading and watching, seemed to fit the age criteria. Of those, fourteen did not respond; six did not end up fitting the age criteria; four responded initially but did not ultimately commit to participating in the study; and six responded and committed to the year-long study. My final sample consisted of six women; of those, four also posted fanfic in LJ, which informed my decision to choose LJ as the second site of study.

Of the six focal participants whose work is discussed in this dissertation, five are scattered across the United States and one lives in Sweden.<sup>19</sup> During the 2008-2009 academic year, participants ranged in age from 18 to 24. Three students attended traditional four-year institutions, one student was taking online courses, one student was in law school, and one student decided, after I had recruited her, to take a year off due to financial constraints. Cam is the only participant who is not a U.S. citizen, and ultimately her nationality makes little difference given the focus of the study since she is fluent in

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<sup>19</sup> I did not look for participants who identified themselves as U.S. citizens; rather, I looked for writers who indicated English was their primary language.

English and is, in fact, highly respected within the fanfic community because of her writing style. To use Parrish's distinction, KouTai, Kayla, Rae, Kit, Cam, and FlightOfFenix are all *fans* who actively engage in the kind of semiotic, enunciative, and textual practices Fiske describes ("Cultural"). While I focused on their fanfic practices that occurred in FFN and LJ, their involvement in fan culture extended beyond fanfic, and this involvement served to further inspire and also deepen their fanfic practices.<sup>20</sup> I offer more detailed profiles of the study participants in Chapters Four and Five; here I offer brief statistics on each one.

**Rae:** At the time of the study, Rae was in her second year of college and was considering declaring a major in philosophy and a minor in English. As of December 2008, Rae had written six stories for *House, M.D.* and *Transformers/Beast Wars*. She identified herself as a slash writer; as I note in Chapter Two, slash is a particularly controversial practice that involves taking heterosexual characters from the source text and putting them in homosexual relationships or situations.

**Kayla:** I recruited participants during the summer, and at that time Kayla had plans to return to college for her sophomore year. However, by September she had decided to take a break from her studies as a Computer Science major and was in the process of applying to other colleges in the Northeast with the hope of returning to being a student in Fall 2009. By the end of the study, she had put those plans on hold as she awaited the birth of her first child. As of March 2009, she had written 29 stories for *Harry Potter*, *House, M.D.*, *Buffy: The Vampire Slayer*, and *Bones*. In addition to being an author, she was also a beta reader.

**KouTai:** KouTai was also a beta reader and has been active on FFN since 2005. She participates on LiveJournal as well as several other fan sites. At the time I recruited her, she had written 71 stories for a variety of media texts, including *Harry Potter*, *Gilmore Girls*, *Pirates of the Caribbean*, and *Twilight*. She noted that she is best known for her *angst*<sup>21</sup> stories and that she had taken up a new fannish practice to relieve the stress of college: creating and remixing music videos. During the year of study, she was a

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<sup>20</sup> KouTai and Kayla participate in role-playing games (RPGs); FlightOfFenix and KouTai maintain their own fan-related websites; and KouTai creates online fan videos.

<sup>21</sup> As defined by Wikipedia, *angst* is a genre "indicating heavy and sometimes depressing themes, and characters suffering emotionally in some way. Relationship break-up, character death, and hurt/comfort are all forms of angst stories."

freshman; after her first semester, she transferred to a university closer to her family. At the time, she was deciding between an English and Computer Science major.

**FlightOfFenix:** Like KouTai, FlightOfFenix also wrote for a number of media texts and was the most prolific of all the participants: she had written 53 stories for *X-Men*, *Sonic the Hedgehog*, *Monk*, and *CSI*. A member of FFN since 2005, she was an unofficial beta (she did not have a beta profile) who also had a LiveJournal account. She was a Computer Science, Programming, and Web design major and was in her first year of a medical transcription program.

**Cam:** Cam was the only participant who did not live in the United States; she was a law student studying criminal law in Sweden with plans to pursue a medical degree. I was initially hesitant to include a non-American student in the study since her experiences with writing courses would not align with the other participants; however, I felt convinced by her fluency in English (she writes her fanfic in English) and by what she could contribute in terms of her sophisticated meta-awareness of her practices and the challenges she shared with the other participants, including managing her time. Like KouTai and FlightOfFenix, Cam wrote in FFN and LJ, and for media texts like *NCIS*, *Harry Potter*, and *Smallville*. Like Rae, she also wrote slash.

**Kit:** During the year of study, Kit was a sophomore attending college on the East Coast and majoring in nursing. She had been a member of FFN since 2003, and also wrote on LJ. In addition to writing *House* fic, she wrote for *Super Smash Brothers* and *Stellvia*. (See Appendix B for a demographic description of the study participants.)

It is difficult to say with conviction that these six participants are “typical” fanfic writers: Because fanfic is an extracurricular practice, the time participants devote to it varies greatly. Age, access to the Internet, and available time are just a few factors that determine participation.<sup>22</sup> Participants who are college students are at the mercy of the

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<sup>22</sup> Indeed, these fannish practices depend, above all, on access to technology—computers, televisions, and some way of connecting to the Internet at home or at school, or both. KouTai mentioned that during the 2008 Winter Break she had to negotiate with family members to get time on the computer. Otherwise, none of the other participants mentioned having trouble accessing the Internet. However, not all of them had access to televisions, which meant that they were not always up to date on *House* episodes. Instead, they waited until they had time and could watch the episodes on the Internet. This lag in time meant sometimes avoiding reading fics, or being careful to read only those that did not indicate that there were spoilers.

A note: *Spoiling* involves a group of active consumers pooling their knowledge to try to unearth

fluctuating demands of the academic calendar. The study participants were generally more active—in terms of reading, writing, reviewing, and responding to my emails—during their academic breaks. Thus, while these participants are not representative of all fanfic writers, they are representative of a certain demographic: students whose participation is not always consistent due to the demands of their school schedules. In Chapter Six, I come back to these real-world challenges that impose upon the participants' extracurricular practices.

While it was my intention to work with college students, it was not my intention to work with only women. My focus was not on gender, in part because, as I mention above, so much recent scholarship on fan fiction has focused on issues related to gender. This attention to gender has advanced a number of important conversations related to digital literacies: for instance, the ways in which the anonymity of cyberspace has permitted self-expression for those who have been historically oppressed and also the ways in which that anonymity has reified that marginalization and silencing (see Cumberland). Also, these ongoing conversations acknowledge the significant contributions by women to fan communities and practices and, importantly, undermine patriarchal and heterosexual assumptions that have traditionally ignored women's participation, particularly in computer-mediated communication (CMC). Nevertheless, my initial intention was to focus on college students more broadly as a demographic that had been previously excluded from qualitative studies on extracurricular literacy practices (Scheidt).

There are a few reasons for why I ended up working with six women. First, while the statistics are hard to pin down, it is fair to say that the majority of fanfic writers are women (see Pugh; De Kosnik). Second, within the subgroup of *House* fanfic writers, the

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the secrets of a particular series before they are revealed on air. (*Spoiling* and *spoilers* are related but separate notions: fanfic writers employ the term “spoilers” as a courtesy—that is, to warn readers that there are facts about certain episodes that will be revealed in their fics. This gives those readers not current on their knowledge of a text the chance to exit out of the fic.) In *Convergence Culture*, Jenkins uses the particularly vibrant *Survivor* spoilers as an example of collective intelligence at work. He argues, “Spoiling is empowering in the literal sense in that it helps participants to understand how they deploy the new kinds of power that are emerging from participation within knowledge communities” (29). He also notes that spoiling is particularly popular among college students since, like fanfic, it gives them an opportunity to exercise their growing competencies in spaces where “there are not yet prescribed experts and well-mapped disciplines” (52).

majority appears to be women. (I say more about how much we can trust the identities of online participants later in this chapter.) Third, within the subgroup of *House* fanfic writers, those who are college students are primarily women. That college women participate in certain online practices like blogging and fanfic has been noted in several studies: according to the *2009 US College Student Report*, published by Anderson Analytics, LiveJournal ranks #6 among college students.<sup>23</sup> The study attributes the success of the network in part to the increasing popularity of blogging, especially among college students who “are four times more likely to blog” than adults and to college women in particular who “are three times more likely than their male counterparts” to maintain a blog. Therefore, the chances that I would work with only or mostly female participants were very high, and indeed women were the ones who responded to my recruitment emails.

Let me add this note on the complexities of recruiting online participants: the anonymity the Internet affords can complicate matters between the researcher and researched. Cumberland notes that there is no way to verify claims of identity short of meeting informants face to face, and “a certain amount of unscholarly faith in the good will of cybercitizens is required for studying the Internet” (263).<sup>24</sup> While researchers’ access to fans has increased—I could easily track and correspond with the participant who lives in Sweden—such access also requires a leap of faith for both parties involved. Because the risks associated with participating in the study were relatively low, and because the social and political norms of the sites I examined do not necessarily encourage participants to post blatantly misleading information, I have no reason to believe that the participants were misrepresenting their ages, their genders, their majors, or their geographic locations. And while fanfic participants often use pseudonyms, from my observations and conversations with the study participants, they do so not necessarily to conceal their identity as much as to be playful and to index their identity as it relates to the particular texts, communities, and practices. Their focus is on writing fan fiction and

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<sup>23</sup> After Facebook, Google, Yahoo!, MySpace, and YouTube.

<sup>24</sup> Cindy Mendelson elaborates on this risk, noting that the “combination of a cultural milieu that supports experimenting with identity and the ease with which individuals can misrepresent themselves can result in situations in which the potential to recruit participants with fictitious identities is a real risk and a threat to the true values of the findings” (321). However, she also notes that the potential for fraud exists in the offline environment as well. Researchers of online spaces and practices must continue negotiating these complex issues.

demonstrating their commitment to the source text, author, or celebrity—not on trying to falsely represent themselves. Nevertheless, there is no way for me to absolutely confirm that the participants are who they claimed they are, and because I chose not to conduct face-to-face interviews, I have to take them at their word.

Likewise, participants must have faith in researchers and in the research process. Fan fiction participants have long been vulnerable to the ridicule of outsiders, as I have established, and the Internet has increased their visibility and with it their vulnerability. Thus, online communities have become wary of researchers who contribute to this tradition by invading their space and plundering the materials for their own purposes (Hudson and Bruckman; Hellekson and Busse; Kustritz). In her study of fan cultures, Anne Kustritz recalls her worries upon interacting with fan writers, noting that she felt “parasitic” and “out of place” because she was a fan but not a content producer; she felt she had little to offer fandom (25). These concerns are valid, and my goal has been to create a reciprocal relationship with the participants—that is, to give something back. What I hope to give them (even if they choose to remain anonymous) is recognition for their rich extracurricular literacy practices and the real work they do outside the walls of the composition classroom. In taking their work seriously, I hope to contribute to the body of scholarship that validates fan practices and to the body of work that validates students’ extracurricular literacy practices. In the process, I can contribute to and preserve the well being of the participants and their practices.

I have reflected on issues related to anonymity, trust, and reciprocation in an effort to be reflective about my practices as a researcher. Marilys Guillemin and Lynn Gillam advocate that researchers adopt a reflexive research stance that requires them to engage in “a continuous process of critical scrutiny and interpretation, not just in relation to the research methods and the data but also to the researcher, participants, and the research context” (275). Throughout this project, I examine not only how the insiders in fan fiction communities attempt to sustain the well being of the community but also how I, as an outsider, sustain or perhaps disrupt that sense of well being. These are not new questions for researchers, but we must be constantly vigilant in our efforts to ethically study the complex “field” of the Internet. If I argue that students should think critically about the sites of literacy in which they participate, so I must argue that instructors and

researchers should think critically as well. The participants were enthusiastic and generous with their time and their materials, and with the exception of one, were less concerned about protecting their identities in the study than I had anticipated. As researchers of online spaces and practices, we must establish connections with participants, continuously negotiate our own insider/outsider statuses and (non)authority as academics and fans, and maintain the well being of the communities we study.

Finally, it is important that I reiterate that this is a small study, and that the six participants I worked with and their texts and practices are not meant to be representative of the work published on LiveJournal.com or FanFiction.Net or of Internet fan fiction in general. My aim, as I establish in Chapter Two, is to describe the conventions and dynamics of a very specific subset of fan fiction and to further establish the vastness and complexity of fans and their practices, particularly as they have moved online and as they are working with the affordances and constraints of emerging sponsors of literacy. The in-depth study of cases “helps illuminate the situated nature of learning to read and write, and the complexity of individual persons and practices of literacy” (Lam 465). The section that follows describes data sets that make up this study and my methods of both data collection and analysis.

### **Data Collection**

The data collected for the study include participants’ profile pages on FFN and LJ, their fan fiction texts, reader reviews of these texts, public site interactions, private beta reader exchanges, and interviews I conducted with them over email and IRC. (See Appendix C for a table quantifying the data I collected.) I chose this data because it illustrates how participants are interactively and reflexively positioned, how they interact with each other, and how they negotiate circulating ideologies related to writing. I collected hundreds of reader reviews; however, I ended up working with fewer than I had intended because so many of them were one-line comments that primarily consisted of positive and encouraging remarks rather than any sustained or critical feedback. (I discuss the number and nature of these reader reviews in Chapter Five.) Also, my intention was to collect and analyze beta reader exchanges, but as I also discuss in Chapter Five, the participants had problems with the beta reading system, and during the

one-year study few of them were actually working with beta readers or with beta readers who were helping them specifically with their *House* fics. Furthermore, few of them had retained for their records their exchanges with betas. In Chapter Five, I include exchanges between Kit and her beta readers, and in my future work I plan to focus much more on beta reading and the affordances and limitations of this system across various sites.

In order to collect data, I established accounts in both FFN and LJ. Doing so meant that I could participate beyond merely reading members' profiles and fics and actually send emails to them to see if they would be interested in participating in my study. I positioned myself in the group as an informed observer who did not participate in fanfic but who was a fan of *House, M.D.* and who was interested not in criticizing fanfic practices but rather in learning more about them. I informed them that I was a graduate student and composition instructor, which I hoped would position me as a fellow student who had some authority about writing—but not so much authority that I would be perceived as threatening.

I also wrote field notes and memos and generated secondary research questions while observing the two sites, coding the nine interviews, watching *House* episodes, and keeping up with *House*-related news generated in the media during the course of the year-long study. (For an excerpt from my field notes, see Appendix D; for the list of secondary research questions that organized the data chapters, see Appendix E.) I routinely captured screen-shots and printed out hard copies of the website pages so that I would have the data should, for instance, a participant suddenly decide to cancel her account and leave FFN or LJ or should either site modify its design or policies. These screen-shots, some of which appear in Chapters Four and Five, and hard copies preserve data that could have at any moment disappeared, given the instability of online sites and texts.

### *Semi-Structured Interviews*

Over the course of the study, I sent interview questions to the participants nine times, an average of one set of questions, varying in length and number, every four to six weeks. My aim was to keep in touch with the participants on a regular basis so I could sustain their interest and participation and develop a rapport with them without overwhelming them, especially during their academic terms. I asked each participant the

same questions in order to establish reliability, and my questions evolved as I went along. (For a sample interview, see Appendix F.) When I determined that a participant's responses to my questions warranted additional probing, or if I had questions about a story a participant had written or an exchange they might have had with another fanfic writer, I sent follow-up questions to that individual. For example, in the first interview, I asked this question: "Does the writing you do in one space inform the writing you do in another space?" KouTai initially responded, "Nope. My different writing spaces are usually kept secret from one another." After reading her response, I then sent her another email and asked, "Can you tell me a bit more about your answer? I'm wondering if, for instance, the skills you acquire/develop in one space transfer to another. And why you keep writing spaces 'secret from one another?'"

I chose written interviews for several reasons: to connect with students who I assumed already felt comfortable writing and corresponding in the virtual environment; to create an efficient way to communicate with participants who exist in disparate geographic spaces; and to give them the opportunity to possibly reflect between the time they received the questions and when they answered them.<sup>25</sup> Reflection happens when learners "analyse or evaluate one or more personal experiences, and attempt to generalize from that thinking. They do this so that, in the future, they will be more skillful or better informed or more effective, than they have been in the past" (Cowan 17). I also kept in mind Gere's advice to composition instructors: "Our students would benefit if we learned to see them as individuals who seek to write, not be written about, who seek to publish, not to be published about, who seek to theorize, not to be theorized about" ("Kitchen" 89). Interviews gave the participants the opportunity to speak for themselves and offer their own thoughts (i.e. reflection) about their practices.

One participant, FlightOfFenix, preferred corresponding by way of Google Chat, an example of Internet Relay Chat (IRC) provided to those with Google email accounts. Lam notes that compared with face-to-face communication, this orate mode that closely resembles everyday conversation is often characterized by a greater degree of

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<sup>25</sup> To clarify, I did not necessarily encourage them to take their time responding to the questions or explicitly tell them to take their time. I always tried to acknowledge their busy lives and expressed appreciation for the time it took to attend to my emails. For better or worse, I did not impose a deadline for getting back to me, although I did send follow-up emails if several weeks had passed since I had sent the initial email.

reflectiveness and playful attention to form than other forms of CMC. To be sure, IRC is itself a study in genre: this mode of communication offers a conversation more like a face-to-face interview—with instant questions and responses—but it is not intended for particularly long turn-taking. The genre dictates that each person limit their words in an instant messaging environment, which constrained the kinds of responses I could get from FlightOfFenix. Yet because she preferred this mode of communication, she was willing to extend the conversation and offer short answers over an extended period of time versus short answers through email, where I could not immediately ask for elaboration. Through this process, I learned that it is crucial that researchers continue to study everyday literacy practices *using* everyday literacy practices, and it is also crucial that we be mindful of the potential advantages and pitfalls of these practices. I expand upon these advantages and pitfalls later in this chapter.

In the section that follows, I describe the first- and second-layer analysis I performed once I had collected the data.

### **Data Analysis**

Kevin Leander observes that “there is a vast amount of work to be done to appropriate and develop emerging methodologies for researching the online literacies of youth” (395), but argues that the Internet complicates traditional ethnography. For example, researchers must determine what existing qualitative research methods to adopt to approach the dynamic (and sometimes vanishing) spaces of Web 2.0 and what new methods may need to be created; how to establish connections with subjects via CMC; and how to get approval from Internal Review Boards for the study of human subjects in these emerging sites of study.

With all of the data sets in this study, I began analysis with *grounded theory* (Strauss and Corbin)—the generation of theory from data in the process of conducting research—to allow meaning to emerge from the participants and their literacy practices. (See Appendix G for a table describing my data analysis procedures.) For example, in reading the transcript of each interview (and any follow-up interviews), I read through the transcripts several times, each time underlining statements I found significant and making embedded notes. This first-level analysis, an open coding approach (Strauss and Corbin),

allowed me to identify categories and dimensions. As an example, I categorized participants' thoughts on why they chose to participate in one site versus another or what kind of feedback they claimed they wanted from beta readers and reviewers. Beneath each category, I copied and pasted excerpts from the original interview transcripts so that I could group questions and their corresponding answers that would then allow me to create a kind of narrative within a particular category. (For a partial list of these categories, see Appendix H.) I also used the method of constant comparison, which I further explain below, to identify patterns, extract meaning and recurring themes from the data, and conceptualize the findings.

I first studied the two sites and the individual data sets independently of one another, coding for recurrent patterns as well as structural and generic characteristics, including the history of the site and the templates and codes and conventions. I then conducted a cross-comparison analysis of the two sites, guided by the work of Kathleen Eisenhardt, who argues that within-case and cross-case analysis allows the researcher to engage in analysis that is concurrent with data collection, and also allows for emergent relationships to “enhance confidence in the validity of those relationships” (542). She encourages the researcher to “become intimately familiar with each case as a stand-alone entity” and then to engage in a “cross-case search for patterns” (540). Together with the method of constant comparison, cross-case analysis allowed me to move back and forth between the two sites and, later, to move among the interviews as well as my notes from observing participants' pages and exchanges, examining each item as an individual case and then investigating comparisons and contrasts between them.

An example of how grounded theory, constant comparison, and cross-comparison work together is my analysis of the public comments. When examining the public comments, I created categories that would allow me to look more closely at the kinds of feedback participants (who were not necessarily betas) offered each other. This kind of close analysis revealed, for example, how participants reinforce the site's ideology—that participants “lend a helping hand” and offer constructive criticism—and also how they redefine what constitutes “constructive” criticism. I then compared the data with the study participants' responses in the interviews to again determine the potential ideological agreements and conflicts among participants and between the participants and

the two sites with regard to feedback, one of the most important forms of interaction and collaboration. I present my findings regarding feedback in Chapter Five.

These approaches to first-level analysis made way for second-level analysis. After progressing through the stages of open coding, I selected data that would illustrate how sponsorship occurred within these two sites of literacy: how, for example, the site managers and advertisers attempt to control the participants as well as the content; how the sites instill ideologies that promote, as I have mentioned, interaction, collaboration, and reflection; how the study participants are interactively and reflexively positioned within the site; and whether or not they can or do attempt to negotiate ideologies and positions based on their own knowledge, skills, and preferences. Second-level analysis included micro-level examination and reading of participants' writing, both in the interviews with me as well as on the fanfic sites. Literacy sponsorship was the framework, and I borrowed four of Brandt's terms (recruit, enable, regulate, and suppress) to analyze how the two sites of study served as contemporary sites of literacy and to understand the social relationships at work within this gift economy. I used positioning theory as a discursive analysis of interaction. Positioning theory paired with a framework of literacy sponsorship and used as a discursive analysis of interaction, revealed 1) the ways the sites-as-sponsors interactively position participants vis-à-vis roles and circulating ideologies articulated in the registration processes and templates of the profile page and homepages and 2) the ways the participants in turn reflexively position themselves by working within those rules and circulating ideologies. In the registration process, roles like "author" and "reviewer" are hinted at but not fully articulated; in the profile pages, these roles and others become much more explicit. Participants can take on roles, such as readers, writers, forum leaders, and beta readers, but then according to their own experiences, values, and skills position themselves as *particular* kinds of readers, writers, forum leaders, and beta readers. These positions can change as participants alternately take up or drop roles and responsibilities or as their literacy practices shift; positioning theory accommodated these dynamic roles and practices.

To analyze the content of the pages, I took a spatial approach, moving from right to left and top to bottom. Studying the layout of the pages helped me to determine how

the sites reinforce, through the templates, ideologies of writing they had begun to establish in the registration process and then how the participants generate content that might resist or reinforce those ideologies. I moved from the top of the page, left to right, to the bottom of the page, left to right, operating under the assumption that the site would place critical information at the top. This “critical” information often serves a fairly mundane purpose: for instance, placing participants’ contact information in the top left-hand corner and advertisements in the top right-hand corner creates visual cohesion across the pages and makes it easier for participants to contact one another. However, as I discuss in Chapter Four, the looming advertisement perched in the top right corner serves as a reminder of the commercial sponsors present in this site of literacy who have a vested interest in participants, practices, and ideologies present in these sites.

After determining the features each template requires, I began noting the roles the sites provide participants in an attempt to recruit, enable, regulate, and suppress literacy practices that do or do not align with their ideologies. These roles are specific to the site or specific to the more general practice of fan fiction. I also noted how participants introduce new roles in the process of introducing themselves, as well as the ways in which they seem to modify or redefine the roles provided by the sites—that is, how they reflexively position themselves within a site-sponsored role. I noted ten roles articulated by the sponsor or the participant or both across the ten pages, which I illustrate in the table below:

**Table 3.1: Participant Roles**

	Beta	Forum	Author	Fan	Reader	Reviewer	Consumer	Blogger	Other	Student
Cam			X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Kayla	X		X	X	X	X	X		X	
Kit		X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X
KouTai	X	X	X	X	X	X	X			X
FOF		X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X
Rae			X	X	X	X	X			

An example of what I called a “site-specific role” is Forum/Community Participant (abbreviated as “Forum” in the Table). In both sites participants can create or participate in forums (FFN) or communities (LJ) that host conversations about fanfic-related topics.

The topics of these conversations include everything from favorite romantic pairings on *House* to questions about the writing process. Examples of what I called “fanfic-related roles” are Reviewer and Beta. The process of reviewing others’ stories before and after they have been published is a well-established practice within fan fiction that has translated to, and been reshaped by, Web 2.0. For instance, in the past the communication often occurred within a vacuum, between the author and the reader. The Internet has expanded that space to accommodate multiple voices, making it possible for hundreds of readers to respond to a story and also respond to one another’s comments, and for the author to interact with readers. These conversations contribute to the intertextual nature of fan fiction in Web 2.0, where authors work with existing texts and genres and pull from a variety of resources.

An example of a role introduced by a participant is that of Student. These sites host people of all ages and backgrounds, and participants are not required by the site to mention their occupations or any expertise that they may bring to bear on the community. Thus, the study participants determine on their own whether or not to mention their student status, and Table 3.1 reflects those decisions.

I determined what roles were particularly salient according to how often they appeared across all six participants’ profile pages and whether or not participants discussed these roles in their interviews. I also determined saliency according to my own limited participant-observation, taking into account features that seemed important but that participants might have overlooked or dismissed. I determined that Forum/Community Participant, Blogger, and those roles that fell under the category of Other were less salient roles according to the parameters of this study. Blogging is an increasingly popular form of literacy, and I identified Cam and Kit as Bloggers who use their LiveJournal accounts not only to post their fan fiction but also to describe their day-to-day activities that often extend beyond those fanfic practices. However, in this study I was primarily interested in their online activities rooted in fan fiction, which explains why Beta, a role specific to fan fiction, is a more salient role than Blogger. The category of Other is a catch-all that I created to describe the activities or identities not related to either fanfic or academic activities that participants articulate on their pages but that do

not otherwise appear particularly salient. Time and space prevent me from discussing Forum/Community Participant in this study.

However, I determined that Beta was significantly salient because it suggests a participant who has achieved a special status through their reading, writing, and responding practices in the community; the role reflects a participant's investment in both the practice and the community and the site's faith in these participants to enable and regulate literacy without necessarily suppressing it—that is, to maintain a collaborative and constructive writing environment. Anyone can create or join a forum, but the role of a beta requires a certain level of expertise and experience. The role also offers opportunities to more closely examine the peer-to-peer sponsorship that occurs in these sites. Therefore, beta readers and the beta reading process constitute a significant component of both data chapters.

The research questions I pose in this stage of research helped me organize the data according to themes I noted across the pages and also helped me create interview questions for the participants. For instance, I noted that on all of their pages the participants mention their preferred genres and romantic pairings, thereby positioning themselves not just as authors but also as authors with particular preferences and experiences. While the interviews I conducted with the six study participants over the course of the year-long study merit their own analysis, I use them in Chapter Four to supplement my analysis of the profile pages and my limited participant observations.

Below, I provide two sample data analyses and demonstrate how I moved from first-level to second-level analysis, thinking about how a framework of literacy sponsorship in combination with positioning theory reveals how sponsors and participants are interactively and reflexively positioned in their efforts to negotiate circulating ideologies.

### *Sample Data Analysis*

In this section, I offer two samples of the kind of analysis that I conducted during and after the year in which I collected data. Sample 1 and Sample 2 serve as precursors to Chapters Four and Five, respectively. In Sample 1, I analyze a section of Cam's FFN profile page, using positioning theory as a method of analysis to demonstrate the ways in

which Cam positions herself within the community once she has registered with the site and, in doing so, negotiates the rules of both the site and of fan fiction more generally. In Sample 2, I analyze excerpts from a story Kit submitted to one of her betas; the excerpt includes the beta's comments. I use this text, as well as excerpts from Kit's interviews with me, to illustrate the "global" and "local" feedback betas offer to authors as well as the ideological negotiations that can occur among beta, author, and site.<sup>26</sup>

### Sample 1

Below is an excerpt taken from Kayla's FFN profile page. On her page she created a category called "My Fandoms & Pairings" in which she explains her literacy practices and, in doing so, positions herself not only within the FFN ideologies but also within fan fiction ideologies that dictate she articulate her generic preferences. She explains:

I both read and write mainly slash. The reason why? Most of the series I follow have male characters I prefer over the female characters. *Harry Potter*, for example, has far more interesting male characters than female characters, and as such, it seems more logical to put the boys together, especially when I get a feeling of UST.<sup>27</sup> [...] Since I like writing fanfics where it's not a matter of just kiss-kiss-get-together, I like the extra layer of complicated that House/Wilson seems like a very logical leap, and watching the show with the slash goggles on means hearing and seeing gay stuff all the time.

FFN encourages authors to share information about themselves, providing prompts for information the site deems important and also allowing participants to create their own categories and to provide information they, not necessarily the site, deem important or interesting. It has become standard practice for fan fiction participants—not just in FFN and LJ but also in most online fan fiction sites—to indicate whether or not they read and write slash. Given the controversial nature of slash, and in order to maintain a constructive writing environment, authors have taken to announcing their preferences, sometimes on their profile pages, sometimes on the beta profile pages, sometimes in the

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<sup>26</sup> In the field of composition, "global" describes higher-order features that center on the level of intellectual engagement with the topic or the assignment and include the paper's ideas, content, and structure. "Local" describes lower-order features that center on the technical aspects of the written product, generally focusing on the sentence or word level of the paper. Composition instructors often employ these terms to help students interpret an instructor's feedback and to help them organize their own feedback during peer conferences and workshops.

<sup>27</sup> In the parlance of fan fiction, UST stands for "underlying sexual tension."

Author's Notes that precede their stories, and sometimes in all of these places. Positioning themselves according to this controversial literacy practice helps facilitate constructive—rather than potentially hostile—interactions among participants. Cam not only positions herself within the context of slash but also takes time to explain why she writes it. Throughout the author and beta profile pages, FFN prompts participants to be thoughtful about their practices—to name their genre and romantic preferences, to discuss their strengths and weaknesses as writers, to share their thoughts on someone else's story. By not only stating her preferences but also explaining them—compared, for instance, to FlightOfFenix and Rae, who communicate their preferences vis-à-vis succinct and fairly stern warnings—Cam reinforces the value of being reflective. In FFN in particular, literacy is defined as involving reading and writing as well as interaction and reflection. Cam's willingness to be reflective in turn facilitates constructive interaction with like-minded participants and wards off potentially destructive interaction. By being reflective, she reinforces the ideologies of fan fiction more generally as well as the ideologies of the site. This sample thus demonstrates how Cam negotiates these layers of ideologies, a conversation I continue in Chapter Four.

### Sample 2

Participants also interact by way of commenting on each other's stories. In Chapter Five, I describe and analyze the roles of beta readers and reviewers and the practice of providing feedback. My method of analysis involved creating categories to better understand the genres of feedback; using positioning theory as a form of discourse analysis to reveal the ways the betas and reviewers try to help position the author within the circulating ideologies of the site, of *House, M.D.*, and of fan fiction more generally; and comparing the content of the beta and reviewer comments with the study participants' explanations in their interviews with me concerning what kind of feedback they preferred. This analysis reveals how participants' definitions of "constructive criticism" differs and how, as a result, authors often do not receive the kind of feedback they claim they want. Below are excerpts from the first chapter of a story Kit wrote involving House and Cuddy ("Huddy"). In the story, House is in prison and in solitary

confinement—a storyline that Kit has fictionalized—and Cuddy is interviewing him.<sup>28</sup> In her comments, the beta focuses on both global and local concerns.

## Chapter 1

A clock's ticking was the only sound that was heard in the room. Cuddy had her hands on her temples and rubbed them in aggravation (**whenever possible I try to avoid the word 'had,' (not that I always do) and go for a more active verb. rephrase into: Cuddy's fingers rubbed her temples in aggravation or Rubbing her temples in aggravation, Cuddy turned...**); she then turned her gaze back to the one sitting across from her and mentally groaned. She could tell from the almost 'playful' smirk he wore that today was going to be another one of his sarcastic days.

"How are you today Mr. House?"

"Always with the formalities I see. Seriously, even as a 'fake' doctor you obviously condescend me (**or...you're obviously condescending**), so there's no need for you to respect me."

"How many times do I have to tell you; psychiatry is just as much a medical practice as anything else."

"Sure it is, I enjoy a surgery on my psyche every now and then."

"Mr. House..."

House mimicked her impassive tone. "Cuddy..."

"*Doctor Cuddy.*"

"Now Cuddy, I think we've known each other long enough to drop the formalities. You're even wearing your low-cut red blouse today. You know red is my favorite color," he stated with a suggestive grin. (**Cuddy and her low-cut red blouses. Hah!**)

Cuddy rolled her eyes as she and House had their daily bout over her choice of clothing. She then sat back, took out her notepad and pen, and began her daily round of questions.

[...]

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<sup>28</sup> The beta's in-text comments originally appeared in red font, and she underlined the words that she corrected in terms of spelling. Her final comment was in blue. In accordance with Rackham Graduate School's formatting requirements, I have preserved the underlining but put the comments in black and bolded them.

“You know what I meant. Besides, you know you *don’t* have to be there.” Cuddy looked away briefly, “*God I hate this man.*” She thought to herself. **(I think you could do just as well with a comma instead of a period between man, she. Put the period after ‘briefly’ instead. There is a nice flow. Also, the quotes are unnecessary. Italics express inner thoughts. In other words: Cuddy looked away briefly. *God I hate this man,* she thought to herself. )**

[...]

House stood up and became solemn for a moment causing Cuddy to think that she was making progress. He then leaned over her desk and stared straight into her eyes, causing her heart rate to steadily rise higher and higher. She could feel the excitement of hopefully breaking ground rushing through her veins and the heat rising in her cheeks, mixing together. **(Sentence is a little awkward...maybe break into two sentences? Example: She could feel the excitement\_rushing through her veins and the heat rising in her cheeks mixing together. Could this be a breakthrough?).** She became lost to herself and was shaken back to reality by House’s sudden words.

“Oh, so are **you (you’re or you are)** admitting that you used to deal with psychiatry? The way you play mind games that doesn’t surprise me. Of course then you would have to have gotten a medical degree.” Cuddy’s serious face broke into a small grin. “*That’s* hard to imagine. You don’t seem like the type who would willingly interact with people, much less be patient enough to go through all those years of medical training.” **(Ho ho ho!)**

[...]

**Great first chapter! Just lovely.**

I frame my analysis of this excerpt by turning to Kit’s interviews with me. In our conversations about beta readers, Kit notes that she “often” consults betas, especially if a story is long—as is the case with this ongoing story—or if she feels a story is “missing something.” She explains that she appreciates it when betas do not just “correct” the fic but also offer feedback and ask questions: “It’s one thing to correct a fic, it’s another to hear one say what they thought of the content.”

Kit also likes when betas provide encouragement—“having someone listen to my crazy ideas and indulge them, often, makes me want to write something”—but does not

want “empty praise.” The beta offers encouraging comments throughout this excerpt, even as she corrects Kit’s grammar and mechanics. For example, she hyphenates “low-cut,” and also notes Kit’s characterization of Cuddy wearing a low-cut blouse: “Cuddy and her low-cut red blouses. Hah!” In this brief exchange, the beta addresses both local (the hyphen) and global (Kit’s character development of Cuddy) issues and also offers her approval. Further down, the beta once again offers approval with a “Ho ho ho!”—a sign that she finds Kit’s writing engaging and her character development accurate. Here the beta upholds both FFN’s ideologies, which emphasize accurate spelling and grammar, and Kit’s ideologies, which align with that of fan fiction more generally and which emphasize accurate character development. This excerpt illustrates authors and betas in action, and the ways in which beta readers, considered experts both in terms of their knowledge of the fandom and of writing more generally, help position authors according to the circulating ideologies in any given text. I continue to explore these ideological negotiations in Chapter Five.

### **Role of the Research: Validity and Ethics**

Member-checking was an important part of establishing ethical practices and validating my data analysis. I sent an email to each participant, asking her to read two brief excerpts from the dissertation that incorporated and analyzed her language. The email reminded the participant of our interview, and informed her of her right to read my work and to object to any use of her interviews, profiles, stories, beta exchanges, or public comments/reviews that she found inaccurate or troubling. I invited the participants to ask questions, to express points of confusion, and to correct me if they thought I had misinterpreted or otherwise misrepresented them. I also invited them to elaborate on a point they had made in their interview, or update me—including if they had stopped participating in fanfic or were no longer working with *House, M.D.*, or even how they were doing in their school lives. Four participants responded that they approved of the excerpts; one participant asked that I reduce the length of a review of her fic I had analyzed in order to adequately ensure her privacy, and another offered some clarification concerning an interaction with a member of the site who did not participate in the study. I

reduced the length of the excerpt to remove identifying details and re-sent the excerpt, and she approved the new version. I did not receive a response from one participant.

This kind of regular and candid communication is imperative to nurturing relations between researchers and online study participants, so that these participants do not see researchers as poachers who are merely interested in their online postings but rather as researchers who want to connect with the participants themselves and create and sustain ethical relations.

### **Limitations of this Research**

Throughout this chapter, I have touched upon the limitations of my study, particularly those related to conducting research vis-à-vis computer-mediated communication. Increasingly, researchers of emerging literacies are using emerging tools and technologies to interview and observe participants. For example, Steinkuehler and Black use email, while Jessica Hammer uses instant messaging. However, often there is little meta-discussion of the affordances and limitations of these relatively new methodological tools. For instance, while the study participants, as active participants in a number of online communities, had ready access to email, I nevertheless often experienced long delays between when I sent out the questions and when I received responses. The delay between the time I received initial responses, sent out follow-up questions, and received subsequent responses could affect the flow of conversation—even as it allowed them time to reflect, as I have previously noted. In a face-to-face interview, for example, I would have been able to immediately follow up this answer from KouTai concerning whether her experiences in fanfic have made her feel like she is part of a community:

It depends on the scale of the community. FanFiction.Net is just absurdly large. I am only a small part of that. Places like [...] ficwad.com (which was closed) are smaller on some scales. In those I usually feel/felt that I was a good part of the community.

Instead, I often waited weeks for responses from the participants, who were always apologetic when they did finally respond. Remarks like this one from KouTai were common: “Hello! Sorry this has taken so long! I procrastinate and then misplace emails.” Certainly this was a pitfall to relying solely on communication vis-à-vis the Internet.

Halfway through the study, my emails to Rae started being filtered into her spam box, and I lost touch with her until she realized what had happened and reconnected with me—but then I once again lost touch with her. These delays illustrate the limitations of depending solely on CMC in the research process.

The research questions I outline in Chapter One indicate that I came to this research with certain questions in mind. As is the case with grounded, qualitative studies, my research questions changed with data collection and preliminary analysis, yet these initial questions certainly influenced how I collected data and conducted data analysis. For instance, the study participants did not speak to me in terms of sponsorship, positioning, or writing ideologies; these are terms I impose on the data. And as I have already mentioned, my selection of study participants is not representative of all students or all fanfic participants, and any conclusions I draw are thus limited.

From the start of this study, I was candid with the participants regarding the purposes of my study: to study fanfic practices to see how they might inform the teaching of composition at the college level. For the most part, the study participants, in keeping with their identities as literacy sponsors, were eager to help and honored to be a part of the project and to teach me about the world of fan fiction. However, it is possible that my efforts to be transparent influenced their answers. It is also possible that my decision to be upfront about who I was and my position as a writing instructor influenced them as well. While I hoped that my position as a student might make them feel less intimidated, they may have nevertheless been guarded in their responses to my questions. Given that I corresponded with them only through CMC and did not have the benefit of connecting with them in ways I might if we were meeting face to face—where, for instance, we might have the opportunity for small talk—I felt compelled to send the occasional “chatty” email that did not include any questions for them but rather merely wished them a happy holiday or restful break while still keeping intact the professional boundary. It is difficult to know if these efforts to connect made the participants uncomfortable, and going forward I might ask the participants to talk to me about my methods and help me be reflective about the challenges of conducting research using only CMC.

For multiple logistical reasons, I chose to work with six participants who were not necessarily connected to one another beyond their participation in *House* fanfic. In future

projects, I might focus on one particular sub-group within a particular fanfic community or create a study that involves me following student writers across their online and offline spaces, as Leander and McKim suggest.<sup>29</sup> Doing so would allow me to draw more comparisons between the participants' offline and online literacy experiences.

My hope is that these limitations provide the impetus to advance theories and methodologies in both composition and social science research, especially as we continue to acknowledge the work our students do in the digital extracurriculum. If we are to take seriously our students' literacy practices, we must continue to develop theories and methodologies that do justice to these practices.

### **A Note Regarding the Interdisciplinary Nature of this Project**

Finally, I must address the hybridity of this study. Given my position in an interdisciplinary doctoral program, it seems appropriate that I would create a study that blends traditions of empirical research both from the social sciences and from composition studies to create a hybrid and interdisciplinary genre. In the social sciences, empirical studies are driven and shaped by sets of criteria about what constitutes valid and trustworthy research, and claims and hypotheses are warranted by the data resulting from these studies. In composition studies, empirical research is often shaped by the researcher's experience and observations, and claims and hypotheses are warranted by anecdotal evidence and rhetorical argument. This empirical study was designed according to social sciences criteria for qualitative research, but the claims and hypotheses developed from the data are also put in conversation with empirical scholarship in composition studies. While I use social science research methods, I address an audience that I imagine is primarily composed of composition scholars who situate themselves in the humanities, and therefore I have elected to use present tense rather than past tense. I realize that in doing so I run the risk of seeming to trap the study participants in the "ethnographic presence" (Moje, "Personal 2"). These generic complexities notwithstanding, the hybridity of this project is significant because it allows the conversations occurring in the social sciences and humanities to inform one another. For

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<sup>29</sup> Focusing on one particular subgroup is not necessarily an easy endeavor, as it would require obtaining permission from each participant or not working with those who do not want to be a part of the study. Also, such an attempt might seem like an encroachment.

instance, it allows the field of composition to benefit from social methods and tools used in the social sciences, including but not limited to grounded theory, positioning theory, and discourse analysis. Likewise, it introduces social science to the conversations that are ongoing and emerging in the field of composition.<sup>30</sup>

Ultimately, this hybridity speaks to my dual aims to contribute both to the field of composition (humanities) and the field of education (social sciences). I intend for this project to contribute to emerging scholarship on qualitative methods and research focused on the field of the Internet. Indeed, the Internet acted as both a tool and an object of study for me and for those scholars who aim to develop sophisticated methodologies that effectively examine emerging spaces, identities, and practices like those associated with online fandom. Developing new methods, tools, and frameworks is important so that we can negotiate the peculiar complexities of the Internet. In this chapter, I explain the design of my study and my attempt to address Wilber's concerns that much of the existing research is too often limited in scope and focuses too closely on professors, pedagogy, and measurable learning outcomes, rather than on the emic perspective of students as expert, adaptive users (554). This study is thus a response to her call for a new research agenda for grounded, mixed-method research to capture new literacies from the perspective of users whose practices have an immediate and powerful impact on their literate lives (554). It is also an attempt to contribute to ongoing conversations centered on creating sustainable, ethical research methods on emerging spaces.

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<sup>30</sup> My thanks to Heather Thomson Bunn for helping me theorize the importance of hybridity and for sharing her own experiences as a composition theorist drawing on social science methods.

CHAPTER FOUR  
NEGOTIATING WRITING IDEOLOGIES:  
REGISTERING AND CREATING PROFILE PAGES

We write not as isolated individuals but as members of communities whose beliefs, concerns, and practices both instigate and constrain, at least in part, the sorts of things we can say. Our aims and intentions in writing are thus not merely personal, idiosyncratic, but reflective of the communities to which we belong.

– Joseph Harris

**Introduction**

Web 2.0 offers snapshots of student writers, in their everyday lives, participating in sites of literacy. Examining the ways in which these writers read and write as literacy sponsors have “proliferated and diversified” (Brandt, *Literacy* 3) can be particularly valuable to composition instructors who seek ways to connect students’ extracurricular literacy practices with their academic practices in order to help them be more critical literacy participants.

In this chapter, I begin with an examination of two important processes that have emerged out of Web 2.0 social networks and sites of literacy: membership registration and profile page/homepage design. I do so to describe and analyze the ways that sponsorship and positioning occur within the two sites of study, FanFiction.Net and LiveJournal.com: how site managers and commercial sponsors for both sites envision and articulate what I call writing ideologies and recruit, enable, regulate, and suppress (Brandt) literacy practices accordingly and how, in turn, participants reinforce, reshape, and sometimes resist those ideologies when they design their pages. I then explain the importance of my findings for composition instructors.

My analysis of the membership registration and profile pages reveals ongoing ideological negotiations by participants as they interact with circulating ideologies about what constitutes “good” writing, including how authorship, writing, and feedback are defined and how these definitions are promoted. Examining the registration process and

the process of designing pages reveals how participants are both interactively and reflexively positioned within these sites of literacy—how, to return to Harré and Moghaddam, in

each social milieu there is a kind of Platonic realm of positions, realized in current practices, which people can adopt, strive to locate themselves in, be pushed into, be displaced from or be refused access, recess themselves from and so on, in a highly mobile and dynamics [sic] way. (5-6)

As such, the registration process and profile pages illustrate the triad I have established among sponsorship, positioning, and writing ideology: FFN and LJ serve as examples of literacy sponsorship in Web 2.0, where the sponsor and sponsored simultaneously construct overlapping and intersecting writing ideologies with multiple available positions that aim to serve the agendas of all involved, from the site and participants to the commercial sponsors.

In the sections that follow, I examine these negotiations within the context of Web 2.0 where successful online communities are those that establish codes of conduct and provide access to conversations about writing and other relevant topics and links to other resources, while also granting participants some degree of power to shape those conditions in order to keep them interested and invested. I take up the terms Brandt uses to describe the phenomenon of literacy sponsorship and analyze how they play out within the context of the registration process as well as the process of setting up profile pages and homepages that users create in FFN and LJ respectively. For every site of literacy, these terms must be defined to reflect the agents involved as well as the power structures involved; I do so throughout this chapter.

### **Sponsorship in the Registration Process**

Increasingly in online social networking sites, it has become standard practice to require participants who want to do more than “lurk”<sup>31</sup> to register with the site. The

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<sup>31</sup> *Lurking* is generally understood as viewing material or interactions between participants in an online forum but not actually contributing any text. When the term first began circulating, it described a negative, even menacing, practice that some users likened to stalking. However, lurking has come to be understood as a legitimate form of participation that helps facilitate potential participants’ understanding of the conventions of a particular online group. Establishing accounts and setting up profile pages are the first steps visitors take when they are ready to transition from only lurking to posting their own stories and interacting with participants.

process of registering with the sites is fairly straightforward: a participant either agrees to the terms and registers or leaves in search of other fan fiction sites. This process, though, serves practical as well as ideological purposes. First, it communicates the site's rules and regulations for participation—or, to invoke the language of positioning theory, it helps establish not only the rights, duties, and obligations but also the expectations about how an individual will enact, or sometimes reject, them (Harré and van Langenhove, “Dynamics”). Second, it works to recruit, enable, regulate, and suppress literacy by articulating the sites' values and beliefs associated with participation and by interactively positioning participants within its ideologies. In both FFN and LJ, the most visible writing ideologies promote values consonant with those found in many composition classrooms, such as interaction, collaboration, constructive criticism, and reflection.<sup>32</sup> For example, FFN's Guidelines set up potential participants to interact with community members—but not to do so anonymously:

Signed are authenticated reviews from verified and registered site members. Anonymous reviews, as the name implies, are from individuals who either do not have an [sic] site account or are too lazy to login in. Anonymous reviewer's identity cannot be verified and be trusted. Some individual can take advantage of anonymous reviews to spam an author's story.<sup>33</sup>

By suggesting that anonymous reviewers cannot be verified or trusted, FFN attempts to position potential participants as responsible and trustworthy and to immediately take up rights and duties associated with literacy in this site. Discouraging anonymity could benefit all agents, including the site managers, advertisers, and individual participants, by quashing potentially hostile interaction, such as flaming;<sup>34</sup> deepening connections among participants through collaboration and constructive criticism; enhancing loyalty to the site

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<sup>32</sup> I distinguish between interaction and collaboration since interacting could involve participants chatting about their fandoms or their offline lives and not necessarily collaborating on a story.

<sup>33</sup> Of the reviews of *House* fic that I read, only one was posted anonymously.

<sup>34</sup> *Flaming*, also called *trolling*, generally describes the act of posting inflammatory, derogatory, or provocative messages in public forums. WordIQ.com further specifies the interactions as “deliberately hostile and insulting,” explaining that a *flame* is “never intended to be constructive, to further clarify a discussion, or to persuade other people. The motive for flaming is never dialectic, but rather social or psychological.” It is now common for online communities to post warnings to potential flammers or trolls or to post rules of etiquette wherein which interactions considered inappropriate are defined. According to an article in *The New York Times*, Reuters recently announced that it would start to block anonymous comments and require users to register with their names and email addresses in an effort to curb “uncivil behavior” (Zhuo). I will further discuss flaming in Chapter Five, when I examine how participants offer feedback to one another.

because of this constructive learning environment; and increasing awareness and revenue for commercial sponsors.

In this section, I present my findings regarding how, through the registration process, each site recruits, enables, regulates, and suppresses literacy according to its writing ideologies. The registration processes within the context of fan fiction and Web 2.0 illustrate how sponsors remain, as Brandt notes, tangible reminders that “literacy learning throughout history has always required permission, sanction, assistance, coercion” (*Literacy* 25).

### *Recruit*

By “recruit,” I mean the process of a fan fiction site enticing potential participants not only to lurk but also to register and then more fully contribute their knowledge and skills to the community. Their participation allows the site to expand and host more participants as well as more interests; as such, the participants are also positioned to serve as sponsors to the site, much in the way, for instance, that readers sponsor magazines. However, these sites do not aim to recruit just any participant. Before participants begin posting their stories and more fully interacting and investing with the site, they have to agree to the terms and conditions established by the site. In this process of registration, the sites set the terms for access to literacy, providing powerful incentives for compliance and loyalty.

FFN and LJ share some common rules; each site, for example, discourages participants from behavior, such as flaming, that might undermine the atmosphere of constructive collaboration. But the rules and expectations also differ across the two sites. For instance, FFN dictates “Codes of Conduct” that narrow the definition of what counts as fan fiction. The site requires prospective participants to agree to the Content Guidelines that ban the following kinds of writing:

1. Non-stories: lists, bloopers, polls, previews, challenges, author notes, and etc.
2. One or two liners.
3. MST: comments inserted in between the flow of a copied story.
4. Stories with historical and non-fictional characters: actors, musicians, and etc.

5. Any form of interactive entry: choose your adventure, second person/you based, Q&As, and etc.
6. Chat/script format and keyboard dialogue based entries.

These definitions of what constitutes fan fiction also define what constitutes authorship. For example, the fourth condition, “Stories with historical and non-fictional characters: actors, musicians, and etc.” means that RPF, short for Real People Fiction, is not condoned within this site.<sup>35</sup> Non-stories—“lists, bloopers, polls, previews, challenges, author notes, and etc.”—as well as one- or two-line stories are also banned. Additionally, authors cannot post “explicit content,” or content that warrants the rating “MA.”<sup>36</sup> These Codes of Conduct, along with the “Community Etiquette” I describe below, convey the the site’s values and beliefs about writing, authorship, and feedback. When participants agree to comply with these conditions, they perpetuate FFN’s writing ideologies. Thus, before they have even begun posting stories, participants are interactively positioned by the site as particular kinds of authors who have particular responsibilities, as articulated to them in terms of restrictions on content, genre, and style. These Codes of Conduct reflect FFN’s efforts to recruit fan fiction participants who share its vision, or ideology, in terms of what fan fiction looks like (stories that adhere to rather traditional generic codes in terms of structure and style and involve only fictional character) and what fan fiction *authors* look like (those who adhere to these codes).

The process of registration in these fan fiction sites reveals the lines the sponsors have to toe: the desire to recruit as many participants as possible tempered by the restrictions imposed by commercial sponsors and the desire to create and maintain a credible and safe environment. Recruitment thus means appealing to participants who

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<sup>35</sup> Fanlore.org claims that the genre of RPF dates back to the late 1960s. The site notes, “While some of it is non-sexual, a great deal is more or less explicit gay erotica slash.” The website WattPad posted Top Ten Most Cast Celebrities, a list that ranks celebrities who appear most often in fan stories. On the list: Taylor Lautner, Selena Gomez, Chase Crawford, Ian Somerhalder, Taylor Swift, Zac Efron, and Dakota Fanning. This list reflects the age demographic of WattPad (primarily adolescents) as well as the current interest in vampire productions (*Twilight* and *Vampire Diaries*).

<sup>36</sup> FFN adopts the rating system from FictionRatings.com:

- K: Content suitable for most ages
- K+: Some content may not be suitable for young children
- T: Contains content not suitable for children
- M: Contains content suitable for mature teens and older
- MA: Contains explicit content for mature adults only

The level of explicit material allowed is often a determining factor in where fans post their material.

will abide by the rules and fulfill certain duties and obligations even as they enjoy the rights extended to them by the site. If a site's rules seem too constricting, potential participants can simply take their skills and knowledge (i.e. their gifts) and invest them in any of the other hundreds of thousands of fan fiction sites. In order to remain competitive and continue recruiting participants, FFN and LJ must establish a sense of order by articulating their expectations and ideologies and then providing incentives to stay and comply. Positioning theory further reveals the complexities of these power dynamics. On one hand, the site operators and the advertisers have the money and the resources that allow the site to exist and evolve. These agents have the power to establish the rules—for instance, to define what kind of fan fiction will be allowed in this site—and the power to remove offensive content and to censor or even ban participants who violate the rules. (I pursue this conversation about censorship below in my discussion of how FFN and LJ suppress literacy practices.) Thus, the site operators and advertisers are positioned as the sponsors and individual participants are positioned as the sponsored. On the other hand, the site cannot exist without the individual participants, and emerging websites know that they must work hard to recruit participants and then maintain their interest and loyalty. One way to do so is to provide incentives; in this case, by positioning participants as sponsors themselves who have limited rights to (re)shape the ideologies through their practices so that the community does not merely serve the interests of the site operators and advertisers. In the following section, I further discuss the ways the positions of sponsor and sponsored shift and the ways that practices are enabled and regulated in these sites.

### *Enable and Regulate*

I pair these two terms since they go hand in hand: wherever a site attempted to enable literacy, it attempted to regulate it as well. Returning for a moment to Brandt's definition of sponsorship, sponsors "enable, support, teach, or model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold, literacy" (*Literacy* 19). Each term—"enable," "support," "teach," and "model"—implies a process whereby assistance is offered. I use "enable" as an umbrella term; as I illustrate in the next two chapters, the sites as well as the participants enable literacy by offering social and material support and by teaching and

modeling a particular kind of fan fiction literacy—that is, one that promotes interaction, collaboration, constructive criticism, reflection, and correctness. In FFN, for instance, as potential participants move through the registration process, more and more opportunities become available to them: they can join communities and forums, send emails to other members, and post and respond to stories. These practices support, or enable, a literacy that is in line with the site’s writing ideology. But before they can begin participating in these practices, potential participants have to agree to another list, labeled “Community Etiquette,” of regulations. The site introduces the list with this note: “FanFiction.Net does not filter content and is an open system that trusts the writer’s judgement [sic]. However, there is an inherent responsibility that falls to writers as a result.” It then provides the following responsibilities:

1. Spell check all stories and poetry. There is no excuse for not performing this duty. If you do not have a word processor that has the spell checking feature, use a search engine such as Google.com to find one.
2. Proofread all entries for grammar and other aspects of writing before submission. ‘Hot off the press’ content is often riddled with errors. No one is perfect but it is the duty of the writer to perform to the best of his/her ability.
3. Respect the reviewers. Not all reviews will strictly praise the work. If someone rightfully criticizes a portion of the writing, take it as a compliment that the reviewer has opted to spend his/her valuable time to help improve your writing.
4. Everyone here is an aspiring writer. Respect your fellow members and lend a helping hand when they need it. Like many things, the path to becoming a better writer is often a two way street.
5. Use proper textual formatting. For example: using only capital letters in the story title, summary, or content is not only incorrect but also a disregard for the language itself.

This community etiquette reinforces the sponsor’s definition of “author” and “good” writing, and more generally, its writing ideologies. While there are a number of ways to interpret the ordering of these responsibilities, if it is assumed that the site has placed them in hierarchical order, beginning with the most important and ending with the least important, then the message to authors is that they should be most concerned with posting

stories that have been proofread for correct spelling, grammar, and “other aspects of writing”—what composition instructors consider “local” issues. Even if not listed in alphabetical order, local issues still seem to be privileged as they are the most frequently and explicitly addressed. Checking that their spelling and grammar is sound is a responsibility, a duty, all authors must observe. The site does not offer reasons why correct spelling and grammar might be important, but this demand likely serves both practical and ideological purposes. Correct spelling and grammar can improve the reading experience for the millions of international participants who are writing, reading, and interacting every day. Thus, this kind of correctness is a characteristic of “good” writing, according to the site. Furthermore, such accuracy demonstrates, at least at a superficial level, quality work to insiders as well as outsiders—particularly those outsiders considering joining the site and those critics skeptical of the quality of fan fiction. Attempting to establish quality control helps recruit and retain those participants who share these values and also positions FFN as a site that shares some of the same standards as the dominant culture despite the otherwise dissenting nature of fan fiction. From a business sense, the first two Codes of Conduct—what positioning theorists would consider duties, responsibilities, and expectations—make sense; they attempt to facilitate the reading and writing experiences for this critical mass of users. From a composition perspective, these first two Codes of Conduct seem to privilege local concerns over global concerns, a prioritizing many instructors resist—at least in the beginning stages of the composing process when the emphasis should be on content rather than grammar or style. Here, the two different processes of revising and editing seem to get conflated in ways that may not be productive, especially for more inexperienced writers or those writers who are using the site to hone their English language skills. A more generous interpretation of these first two Codes of Conduct is that the site encourages writers to attend to the local so that the readers and reviewers can focus on the global, and in this sense the responsibilities and duties can be understood as regulating but also enabling a fan fiction literacy that promotes interaction, constructive criticism, and correctness.

FFN also emphasizes writing as a social process. “Respect the reviewers” positions participants as “aspiring writers” whose stories will be reviewed and who should in turn respect the suggestions and opinions offered by their readers. By noting

that not all reviews “will strictly praise the work,” the site prepares authors for feedback that might be difficult to process and helps them interpret it as constructive criticism, not merely criticism: “If someone rightfully criticizes a portion of the writing, take it as a compliment that the reviewer has opted to spend his/her valuable time to help improve your writing.” This third Code of Conduct reinforces the authors’ responsibilities toward their audience; first, to produce grammatically sound stories with correct spelling, and second, to further demonstrate respect for the audience by taking seriously (but not personally) their feedback. Furthermore, in the process of shaping authors’ practices, FFN also shapes readers’ practices. The message to authors is that they respect a reviewer who “rightfully criticizes” their work—that is, one who does not leave insults or otherwise destructive feedback but rather offers advice that indicates they have read the author’s profile page, Author’s Note<sup>37</sup>, and story and that they are familiar enough with the fandom, standard grammar and style rules, and relevant generic conventions to offer constructive advice intended to help the author. This Code, or responsibility, further enables fan fiction literacy, as it is defined by FFN; the site provides the tools that encourage communication between author and audience, which in turn helps authors meet the ideologies circulating within the site as well, all of which contributes to an inclusive and constructive working environment.

The fourth Code of Conduct reinforces the notion that writing is social while also reinforcing the definition of author as someone who is not merely focused on his or her own writing but also supports other authors: “Everyone here is an aspiring writer. Respect your fellow members and lend a helping a hand when they need it.” The site positions everyone as “an aspiring writer,” and further defines a writer as someone who reads other writers’ work and who offers advice. This Code serves as a reminder that FFN functions not only as a place for individuals to post their stories and honor their favorite fandoms but also as a social network. Indeed, a social network that also functions as a writing community necessarily upholds the value that writing is a social phenomenon; those who join the community do so, presumably, because they intend to do more than merely focus on their own writing. An author who exists within a social

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<sup>37</sup> Authors can use the Author’s Note to offer explanations or seek advice from readers. Many of the public comments readers leave at the end of stories are in response to author’s questions or concerns. I further discuss these in Chapter Five.

network, the site suggests, must assume responsibilities that serve the community. FFN thus positions participants as peer sponsors who have the power to enable and even regulate one another's fan fiction literacy practices.

Finally, the fifth Code of Conduct further positions authors as attentive to conventional details. FFN not only insists on conventional formatting but furthermore positions those who violate this rule as egregiously irresponsible. As with the first two Codes, this last one likely eases the reading experience for the international audience and makes it at least *appear* as though participants in this site share a concern for “proper” formatting—which for FFN demonstrates a respect for language that, the site seems to imply, could result in better writing. FFN's rules reveal how the site attempts to recruit new members by demanding writing that achieves a certain level of quality and also how it provides the social and material conditions that enable and regulate that level of quality.

Perhaps because LJ is not explicitly a community devoted to fan fiction and “aspiring writers,” because it appears more lax in its efforts to monitor the everyday activities of participants, and because it is a blog network and as such tolerates less “standard” practices, no such list of responsibilities and duties exists. However, each sub-community within the sites reserves the right to post its own rules and regulations for participants to follow. Thus, the site offers guidelines for general participation but then leaves the task of providing guidelines for more particular forms of participations, such as fan fiction, to individuals and sub-groups. The absence of such specific guidelines, or the lack of regulation, could work both for and against the site and the participants. For example, the site itself does not position participants to be attentive to “correctness,” which could potentially undermine the quality of fics—or, at least, that is what FFN might suggest. Yet, as the study participants explain to me, LJ's technology better supports interaction as well as feedback that is more constructively critical, which could in turn enable the kind of critical fan fiction literacy that I have been discussing. As I explain in Chapter Five, these differences between the two sites factor into the study participants' decisions regarding where to post their stories and factor into, as well, how successfully the sites and participants enable literacy.

In the following section, I explore the final term, *suppress*, to analyze sponsorship in FFN and LJ and to think about how the sites interactively position participants.

### *Suppress*

I have indirectly suggested in my analysis of how these two sites recruit, enable, and regulate literacy how they might also suppress it. Up until relatively recently, access to computers and the Internet determined who could and could not participate in online sites of literacy, and literacy was suppressed accordingly. Today, most Americans have some access to the Internet; however, as Jenkins (*Fans*) notes, the participatory gap remains, defined now by the frequency and duration of that access that in turn determines the depth and sustainability of participation.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, while Black (*Adolescents*) suggests that there is a lack of hierarchy in fan fiction sites, and while I argue in this chapter that FFN and LJ—examples of sponsors of literacy in the era of Web 2.0—invite participants to shape the writing ideology of these sites, I also argue that these are not sites in which no hierarchy exists. Certainly FFN’s Codes of Conduct illustrate the presence of sponsors who establish and monitor (to some degree) the rules of engagement. Some visitors could browse FFN, read the Codes, determine that they do not agree with them, and move onto other sites where the ideologies seem more closely aligned with their own. Other visitors could determine that they agree with FFN’s rules and regulations and are convinced by their incentives, and sign on. Even more likely, they might register, like the participants for this study, with several different sites and post their work according to their moment-to-moment preferences and needs.

For Kit, Cam, Kayla, KouTai, FlightofFenix, and Rae, FFN’s ideologies aligned enough with their own that they agreed to the terms and joined the site so that they could post their stories, engage in conversations with other participants, and assume additional roles and responsibilities. However, five out six of them also belonged to other fan fiction sites, in part because FFN did not always serve their needs. For example, Cam and Kit also participate in LiveJournal.com, in part so that they can post more sexually explicit

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<sup>38</sup> As I mention in Chapter Three, these issues related to sustained access affected the study participants’ fan fiction literacy; KouTai, for instance, did not always have access to her family’s computer when she was home during school breaks, a time that she might ordinarily have used to catch up on her fan fiction practices. Thus, she was often not able to give as much time to her fanfic as she might have liked because she alternately lacked the time and the resources.

material or incomplete stories, which are suppressed on FFN. In this sense, LJ seems to offer a broader definition of what constitutes fan fiction. According to LJ's policies, staff and volunteers review all content that is reported by participants as potentially offensive before tagging it as containing explicit adult content. However, having content flagged as containing explicit adult content does not necessarily violate its Terms of Service. Rather, the site notes:

Should any Content that you have authored be reported to LiveJournal as being offensive or inappropriate, LiveJournal might call upon you to retract, modify, or protect (by means of private and friends only settings) the Content in question within a reasonable amount of time, as determined by the LiveJournal staff. Should you fail to meet such a request from LiveJournal staff, LiveJournal may terminate your account. LiveJournal, however, is under no obligation to restrict or monitor journal Content in any way [...].

In the past several years, LJ has become a popular site for fan fiction participants even though it is not explicitly a fan fiction site. Its more laid-back policies concerning content help recruit participants who are turned off by FFN's increasingly vigilant efforts to monitor participants' literacy activities. For LJ, a more relaxed attitude toward explicit material suggests an ideology that privileges authors' freedom of expression—so long as the authors take the appropriate measures to warn other participants and in doing so protect the cohesion of the community. Whereas FFN simply removes—without warning, members have complained—any material deemed offensive, LJ attempts to work with authors to find a way to balance their individual needs with the needs of the community as well as the site, who might lose commercial sponsorship if they do not work to suppress some literacy practices. I return to this conversation later in the chapter when I examine KouTai's profile page and the presence of commercial sponsorship that is almost always a part of participants' online literacy practices.

FFN and LJ establish their rules and regulations during the registration process, beginning to define as well what counts as legitimate fan fiction practices and the roles, such as author and reviewer, which participants can and should take up. Along the way, some literacy practices are enabled and some are suppressed. In an increasingly competitive fan fiction market, each site has to provide incentives in order to recruit participants, including the opportunity to contribute skills and knowledge and reshape the

ideology. Nevertheless, participants are limited in how much reshaping they can do; ultimately, the site managers and commercial sponsors have the responsibility of protecting other members within the site who might be offended by certain material as well as protecting their reputation as credible and ethical sites. This attention to ethics, for instance, is clearly communicated in one of FFN's notes to potential participants: "FanFiction.Net respects the expressed wishes of the following authors/publishers and will not archive entries based on their work," and provides a list that includes Rice, Archie comics, Nora Roberts/J.D. Robb, and J.R. Ward and other authors and producers who have warned fans away from working with their texts and characters. Thus, the effort to maintain good will and to honor the wishes of authors and producers who do not want fans to become *fans*, who do not support fan fiction, trumps fans' desires. However, this warning works to protect fans within the site by positioning them as respectful and then, if they violate this rule, by suppressing their practices.

Ultimately, the circulating ideologies in both FFN and LJ emphasize constructive and respectful interaction among participants. In LJ, participants have a bit more freedom; they can post potentially risqué material or fan fiction that does not fall within the strict definitions prescribed by FFN so long as they take on the responsibility of warning other participants. There is less freedom in FFN; the various rules regulating responsibilities and etiquette convey to participants that they are expected to adhere to a particular kind of fan fiction writing (proper style, grammar, and formatting) and that they are to be respectful when interacting with other participants (they should not post offensive or otherwise forbidden material and should respect what the reviewers "rightfully" critique). Despite these differences, the two sites seem to share the mutual goals of creating and maintaining constructive and harmonious writing communities in which participants are aware that they have certain duties and responsibilities as well as rights and opportunities. In the process of deciding in which site to work, participants must consider the circulating ideologies of each and whether or not they conflict with their own set of beliefs—regarding, for instance, what constitutes acceptable fan fiction—and with their own moment-to-moment interests and needs. The very presence of choice asks participants to be reflective about their ideal literacy practices and sites alongside a sponsor's ideologies. This reflective and comparative work is the kind of

critical engagement with literacy that many composition instructors aim to teach their students explicitly—here, it is learned tacitly.

In the following section, I shift my analysis from the process of registering with a fan fiction site to the process of setting up profile pages and homepages in order to continue analyzing the processes of recruiting, enabling, regulating, and suppressing within these sites of literacy once the participants have agreed to the terms and transitioned from being potential participants to being members. Furthermore, I demonstrate how the study participants, having been interactively positioned by the site as participants whose fan fiction writing ideologies are in line with FFN's, begin to then reflexively position themselves according to their own experiences and beliefs.

### **Sponsorship in Profile Pages and Homepages**

Once participants register with the site and before they can begin posting stories, they have to first create a profile page or homepage in FFN and LJ, respectively. In other words, this literacy practice serves as the gateway to other literacy practices.<sup>39</sup> Thinking in terms of sponsorship and positioning reveals how the process of participants creating profile pages and homepages helps to position them in the community so that they can publish their stories and, if they want, take on additional rights and responsibilities that reinforce the ideologies at work. These pages, then, function as both a responsibility and a right: participants have the responsibility to introduce themselves to the community and to do so according to what information the site deems relevant; they also have the right to share information about themselves beyond the constraints of the template and to be creative in the design of their pages if they have the technological skills to do so. Through the templates, the sites continue to interactively position participants within the writing ideologies articulated in the registration process—ideologies that stress

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<sup>39</sup> By first discussing the process of registering, then discussing the process of creating pages, and indicating that both of these steps must happen before participants can share their own literacy practices (stories), I suggest that some literacy activities in these sites are linear—which does not necessarily accurately reflect how FFN conceptualizes the writing process. It is true that participants could not post stories or take on certain roles and responsibilities until they had registered and established a presence in the community. In that sense, FFN does present a linear writing process in that rules and regulations must be understood and agreed upon before the next steps can be taken. However, beyond the registration process these practices can be less linear and more recursive. FlightOfFenix, for example, frequently revisits her profile page and revises it according to her evolving interests and preferences.

interaction, collaboration, constructive criticism, reflection, and correctness—while also giving them the opportunity to reflexively position themselves by sharing information about themselves and their own values and beliefs concerning their literacy practices. In the process of creating profile pages and homepages, participants can articulate their skills and knowledge and potentially reshape the ideologies forwarded by the site—at least on their own pages and in their own practices. Designing profile pages is a social and discursive process that involves introspection as well as socialization—that calls upon participants to position themselves and manage their “way through a set of relations, commitments, practices, and subjectivities” (Bawarshi 76). The pages afford participants the opportunity to be reflective even as they continue to be positioned by the site.

The process of positioning occurs around conversations about roles available to participants within the site. These are roles that the sites can use as incentives for joining and remaining active in the community. These roles, like that of author and reviewer, are referenced in the process of registering, but become much more explicit in the process of creating profiles. But it is not just the site that determines roles; participants can also articulate other roles that might in turn influence the roles they assume within the sites. For example, several of the study participants note on their pages that they are college students; this information can be used to interactively and reflexively position them as participants who have access to conversations about writing, revising, and collaboration and whose skills might consequently be superior compared to someone else without this access.

In Chapter Three, I describe my rationale for determining which roles are salient and which ones I will not focus on, either because they do not seem salient or because they are beyond the scope of the project. Given the complexity of the role of beta reader as well as of the process of providing feedback, I determined that betas and reviewers merit a much more sustained conversation—one that constitutes Chapter Five. In this chapter, I focus on the remaining salient roles: Author, Reader, Consumer, and Student—all of which, in these sites, constitute and reinforce the more general role of fan in these

sites devoted to popular culture.<sup>40</sup> My description and analyses of these five roles, as well as the ways in which participants attempt to nuance or redefine them, provide the structure for the following section. I examine how each study participant positions themselves within these roles on the profile pages and how they reinforce and reshape the values and beliefs articulated in the registration process in an attempt to make their literacy practices more meaningful. I include a screen image of the profiles or homepages for which I have permission from the participant to do so. This analysis provides critical information about how the study participants position themselves within this site of literacy and also how they attempt to shape the site's writing ideology by articulating their experiences and preferences. At the end of the chapter, I describe the importance of this understanding of positioning to composition instructors.

Before I begin my analysis, I offer this brief overview of the process of creating (and maintaining) profile pages and homepages. Some of the features of the template are static; for example, all profile pages include the number of stories the author has written, defining authorship in quantitative terms. All profile pages position participants not just as authors but also as readers and reviewers, including along the bottom of the pages a section devoted to the stories the author has published as well as the stories they have read and reviewed. In this sense, the pages begin developing for the participants a fan fiction ethos—positioning them as authors who are engaged in the site, reading and responding to others' work. However, the templates also offer open space in which participants can introduce themselves on their own terms, perhaps articulating the skills and experiences they bring to bear on the community or, for novice writers, the skills and experiences they hope to obtain. With this open space, participants can reflect on their own values and beliefs regarding writing fan fiction, and in the process begin to (re)position themselves and develop the ethos the site has begun to establish for them. In this sense, these pages play an important part in the process of interactive and reflexive positioning in the sites by providing a space for determining how participants conceive of themselves and of the other participants by seeing what position(s) they take up and in

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<sup>40</sup> A note on the term “author”: FFN uses “writer” in the registration process and “author” on the profile pages. From what I determined, the site uses these terms interchangeably. Because the site positions participants using the term “author” on the profile pages (versus “aspiring writers” in the registration process), I have chosen to use that term as well for the sake of consistency. As a blogging site not strictly devoted to fan fiction, LJ does not employ either term to position participants.

what “story” (see Davies and Harré, “Positioning”; “Positioning and Personhood”). These efforts illustrate a select group of college students in action, reflecting on their positions and practices within these online communities and within the larger ideologies—associated with the specific site, fan fiction more generally, and the big-D discourse and little-d discourse of *House, M.D.*—within which they are working.

#### Example 1: KouTai’s FFN Profile Page

Below I offer a screen shot of KouTai’s FFN profile page, which I examine in order to analyze the general features of the FFN template and the ways she positions herself in the community vis-à-vis the template. In the process of analyzing her page, I incorporate remarks and explanations from other study participants as points of comparison.

**Figure 4.1: KouTai's FFN Profile Page**

**KouenTaisa**
[hide bio](#)

[Feed](#)
 [Send Message](#)
 [Subscribe](#)
 [Favorite](#)

beta : [Beta Reader Profile](#)

forums: [My Forums](#)

email : [Email](#)

since : 09-09-05, id: 894452, Profile Updated: 10-03-09

country : USA

web : [Homepage](#)



www.DragonTattooFilm.com

Ads by Google

Author has written 77 stories for Harry Potter, Fullmetal Alchemist, Saiyuki, Samurai Champloo, Naruto, Peacemaker Kurogane, Fire Emblem, Chrmn Crusade, Inuyasha, Gilmore Girls, Tsubasa Chronicle, Batman the Animated Series, Grey's Anatomy, Cowboy Bebop, Pirates of the Caribbean, Fruits Basket, House, M.D., Twilight, Law and Order: SVU, Ouran High School Host Club, Dragon Ball Z, and Private Practice.

**Quote of the Day:** Words, once they are printed, have a life of their own.- **Carol Burnett**



**Penname:** KouenTaisa  
**Nickname:** KouTai  
**Fandoms (still writing in):** Harry Potter/Law and Order: SVU/Gilmore Girls/Grey's Anatomy  
**Current Kicks:** Harry Potter/Naruto/Grey's Anatomy/Private Practice/House M.D./Gilmore Girls  
**Latest Reads:** X-Men  
**Currently Writing:** Law and Order: SVU/ Grey's Anatomy/Gilmore Girls  
**Seeking Inspiration For:** Anything and everything. If you want me to write it, just let me know.

**Best Known For:** Angst  
**Odd Fact:** Freshmen in college until the fall.  
**Thought Of The Moment:** ... I dislike research papers more than annotated bibliographies.  
**Recent Endeavor/Adventure:** Finals are coming up soon.  
**Check Out:** <http://youtube.com/user/KouenRoyMustang>, also check out <http://fanfiction.net/~bottleshock> to check out stories that I have co-written. There is nothing there yet, but soon there will be.

**About Me:** I am eighteen and a freshman at UTC. I have thirteen hours worth of classes, because the school keeps changing stuff. Isn't that just nice? I spend the majority of my time doing homework in my dorm. I love to write and read. Writing is my passion and has been so for years now. I am an English Major, and that might end up changing. I hope not. I am a tad obsessive with Batman and Alan Rickman. I am currently into Harry Potter again since I just bought the first two movies, yo. SNAPE! Anyways, I'm writing for Harry Potter and Naruto!

**Pairings (what I am into now):** Elliot/Olivia, Bruce/Terry, Bruce/Selina, Bruce/Alfred (random), Bruce/Dick, Edward/Bella, Jacob/Renesmee, Emmett/Rosalie, Alice/Jasper, Carlisle/Esme, Garrett/Kate, House/Cameron, House/Cuddy, House/Wilson, Wilson/Amber, Meredith/Derek, Izzie/George, Erica/Callie, Hatori/Shigure, Shigure/Ayame, Snape/Lucius, Snape/Draco, Snape/Lucius, Snape/Sirius, Snape/Lily, Remus/Tonks, Ed/Roy (FMA), Roy/Havoc (FMA), Harry/Draco, Snape/Harry, Fai/Kurogane (Tsubasa), Gene/Melfina (Outlaw Star), Jimmy/Racheal (Detective Conan), Heero/Duo (GW). (see how most of them revolve around Snape? or Bruce? Or even House?)

**Updated March 03, 2009**

[Newest Updates...](#)

**Knockin' On Heaven's Door:** With most of our favorite Harry Potter characters in heaven, who is keeping things interesting? Now, we get to see them causing trouble in paradise, while they look down on who's left.

**B is for Bonds:** My newest Naruto fanfiction. I am going to try to do an alphabet drabble series for this like I did with Cowboy Bebop awhile back. Wish me luck!

[Coming Soon...](#)

**Not a damn thing. Sorry!**

[In The Works...](#)

**Law and Order SVU:** They've each had times when they've chose each other over the job. Now, when it seems their relationship as partners and friends are falling apart, they need something to change... but... this isn't the change that either of them intended to happen...

FFN does not provide explicit instructions or guidance for how participants should fill out their profile pages; the lack of rules for writers at this particular moment in the transition into the community could mean that the site feels the templates are fairly self-explanatory or that participants can use other participants' pages as models. It might also be a gesture on FFN's part to appear less rigid—to provide a template that further communicates the site's ideologies but then steps back from the scene and allows individual participants to introduce themselves and their own values and beliefs about *House, M.D.*, fan fiction, or writing. The template thus helps reinforce the values established in the registration process and also introduces new ones. For example, there

are multiple features on the template aimed at facilitating interaction among participants. In the top left corner of the template (see Figure 4.2), consistent across all profile pages, are features that facilitate interaction among participants—reminders that even as participants set up their profile pages they are writing for an audience and that they are encouraged to interact with others.

**Figure 4.2: Profile Page Features—Top Left Corner of FFN Profile Page**



Each of these options allows other members within the community to contact or “follow” a particular participant based on the information provided on the page or based on the stories posted. In this case, participants who like KouTai’s stories or who are interested in learning more about her from her profile page can contact her or keep track of her stories as she posts them.

Below these options on the left side of the page (see Figure 4.3) is a list that further facilitates this interaction and, additionally, begins to introduce the various roles a particular participant has assumed beyond that of author.

**Figure 4.3: KouTai’s FFN Roles—Left Side of Profile Page**

beta:  [Beta Reader Profile](#)  
forums:  [My Forums](#)  
email: [Email](#)  
since: 09-09-05, id: xxxxx  
Profile Updated: 07-22-10  
country:  USA  
web: [Homepage](#)

The “Email” and “web” features provide additional ways to contact the participant. “Beta” and “forums” indicate that KouTai has taken on the roles of a beta reader and

forum participant.<sup>41</sup> Visitors to her profile page can click the links to gain more information about her, for instance, via her beta profile page or by visiting the forums to which she belongs. These roles signal to other members a level of knowledge and commitment—that is, they indicate that KouTai had been involved in the FFN community long enough to have taken on leadership positions and is engaged enough to be participating in sponsored activities.

These additional roles serve as incentives for participants to join FFN and, more importantly, to illustrate a level of involvement that then allows them to take on more roles and responsibilities—to serve as peer sponsors of literacy by recruiting, enabling, regulating, and suppressing literacy. While anyone can, for instance, join or lead a forum, only those participants who meet certain criteria can be beta readers. According to the site, participants interested in taking on the role of beta reader have to meet these qualifications:

- Be a registered member for at least 1 month or more.
- Must have published at least 5 stories on the site OR have published entries totaling at least 6,000 words.
- Must accurately complete both the Profile and Preferences part of this beta section.

The role of beta and its corresponding rights and duties is not specific to FFN; it is a feature of online fan fiction more generally, and thus it translates across fan fiction sites. While LJ does not stipulate who can and cannot be a beta reader in the ways that FFN does, participants in each site likely understand that those who offer to beta read typically do so because they have some experience—in the fandom, in writing, or both—that gives them authority to act as consultants. I devote Chapter Five to the role of beta readers and the feedback process; I mention it here to illustrate that KouTai took on an additional role

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<sup>41</sup> I take Moje's (2010) point that participants may assume a role, but that it is not necessarily clear that simply by making a profile page the participant has accepted the role defined by the sponsor; "one could, after all, create a profile page and then post lists to the site, which would be in violation of what counts as a story and thus of the author role." However, creating a profile page and then violating the definition of author by, for instance, posting lists is a risky move since the profile page is meant to be viewed by other participants who could report the violation. The risk hardly seems worth it since there are other sites that define authorship differently in which the participant would be free to post lists.

that reflects the value FFN placed on members to “lend a helping hand” to other “aspiring writers.”

KouTai’s status of beta reader and forum participant likely lends her credibility, as does the length of time she has been a member of FFN. The category of “country” serves a practical purpose in that it helps organize by nationality the millions of FFN fans and reminds participants that they are writing for a global audience. Furthermore, it also establishes the participant’s native language and position as a writer developing skills in another language if their native language is not English. Finally, the link she provides to her non-FFN website (“web”) allows visitors to get to know her beyond the FFN community. Five out of the six study participants take this opportunity to provide a link to their other fan-related sites, including their LiveJournal blogs. Links to other fan sites can enhance the status of a member, particularly if the member is new to FFN; after all, members new to the site are not necessarily new to the practice of fan fiction.

Thus, the top left-hand corner of the profile pages serves multiple purposes: it facilitates interaction by listing essential contact information and providing links, thereby enabling two literacy practices essential to this site: interaction and collaboration. It also articulates the roles a participant has taken up and encourages visitors to learn more about those roles by clicking on links like “beta,” “forum,” and “web.” Ultimately, this list articulates another ideological value within this writing community: participants should take the opportunity to get to know each other, which can enhance loyalty to each other and to the site and inspire participants to invest more of their time and skills in an economy dependent upon such gifts.

Below this list is another standard feature of the template: a declaration of authorship. This declaration also facilitates the process of members getting to know one another and, furthermore, extends FFN’s definition of authorship. In the process of registering, the role of author begins to be defined as someone, for instance, who posts only sponsored-approved fan fiction; who follows conventional rules regarding spelling, grammar, and format; and who takes into consideration the constructive criticism of readers. This standard statement further defines authorship, this time in quantitative terms—that is, how many stories have been written and how many fandoms the author belongs to: “Author has written [# of] stories for [names of fandoms].” That KouTai

writes fan fiction for other sites is not factored into this particular definition of author; what matters is the work that she has produced within FFN. These statistics, if nothing else, serve a practical purpose: they allow visitors to quickly assess her interests and experience, information that could further facilitate connections and correspondence or, alternately, turn visitors away.

Of particular interest is that the site immediately positions participants as “authors,” as soon as they have posted their first story. It matters not how many stories they have written beyond that first one or how many fandoms they belong to or how long they have been members of the site; they are considered “authors.” This interactive positioning could serve several purposes. First, by positioning participants as “authors,” the site legitimizes members’ fan fiction practices in the face of external criticism that they are more poachers than authors. Second, by positioning them as authors the site attempts to also position them with the rights and responsibilities associated with that role, articulated in the registration process and reinforced in the process of establishing profile pages. These other rights and responsibilities are articulated via the features that appear at the bottom of the page, which is captured in the screenshot below (see Figure 4.4).

**Figure 4.4: KouTai’s FFN Profile—Bottom of Page**

My Stories (78) Favorite Stories (73) Favorite Authors (13) Communities (1)

Sort: [Category](#) . [Published](#) . [Updated](#) . [Title](#) . [Words](#) . [Chapters](#) . [Reviews](#) . [Status](#) .

1. [Where Goes The Good Go?](#)  
 - You never asked. - The emotions behind the break up. McSexie.  
 Grey's Anatomy - Rated: K - English - Romance/Angst - Chapters: 1 - Words: 323 - Published: 6-18-10 - Lexie. G & Mark. S - Complete
2. [You Never Know That It's Going To Be](#)  
 - If anyone had tried to tell you what would happen while he was gone, you would've just laughed it off. - References to GA 6.11/PP 3.11. One Shot. Pairings: Mark/Addison and Mark/Lexie.  
 Crossover - Grey's Anatomy & Private Practice - Rated: K+ - English - Romance/Angst - Chapters: 1 - Words: 284 - Published: 1-4-10 - Lexie. G
3. [If You Could Only See \[reviews\]\(#\)](#)  
 Late night conversations on the phone was not how Mark liked to end things. Mark/Addison, Mark/Lexie.  
 Crossover - Grey's Anatomy & Private Practice - Rated: K+ - English - Hurt/Comfort/Romance - Chapters: 1 - Words: 728 - Reviews: 2 - Published: 12-11-09 - Mark. S - Complete
4. [Life Starts Now: \[Situations\]\(#\) » \[reviews\]\(#\)](#)  
 A series of drabbles based around season six. This will cover couples, and people in general. This will be updated after every episode, so keep your eyes open.  
 Grey's Anatomy - Rated: T - English - Romance/Hurt/Comfort - Chapters: 4 - Words: 1,096 - Reviews: 2 - Updated: 11-5-09 - Published: 10-4-09

These features organize participants' writing and reading practices and, furthermore, assemble the cluster of rights and duties associated with literacy in these sites. "My Stories" organizes participants' stories so that they can be easily assessed and accessed—categorizing them according to important generic conventions including the fandom, language, genre, number of chapters and/or words, number of reviews, and romantic pairing involved. "Favorite Stories" and "Favorite Authors" categorizes participants' interactions with others—that is, their reading, reviewing, and "favoriting" of other participants' stories. Beyond the practical purpose they serve, these features reinforce an ideological value: in this social network, authors should support others by reading their stories, creating links to those stories so that others might read them, and otherwise interacting with other participants. The declaration of authorship at the top of the page can be understood to work in combination with the features at the bottom of the page to define an author as one who not only writes but also reads and enables others' literacy.

Thus, the standard features on the template help reinforce the values and beliefs that FFN conveys in the registration process while introducing others. For example, the mere concept of the page promotes courteous communication among participants and discourages anonymity and the potential for hostile remarks. The registration process positions participants to be thoughtful about the material they post and their interactions with other participants. While there are no instructions on etiquette with regard to the profile pages, it might be assumed that FFN intends for participants to demonstrate that same level of care when they design their profile pages. However, sandwiched between the required features at the top and bottom of the page is an open space for participant customization. In this moment, the site gives up some control, inviting participants to move beyond the constraints of the required features to share information about themselves. In doing so, participants can (re)position themselves as particular kinds of authors with particular experiences and values and, in the process, reinforce or somehow reshape the site's ideologies. In her interviews, Rae explains how she determined what information to include on her profile page:

It's important to let people know something about which shows/movies/books/whatever that you're into and that you write about. It can also be helpful to include which relationships you support and what

kinds of fiction you tend to write, as that will warn off anybody who doesn't share your tastes.

Indeed, the data reveals that it is vital for participants to use these pages to share their preferences for genres and romantic pairings. All six study participants articulate their preferences concerning genre and romantic pairings on their pages—even if they offer no other information about themselves. For these participants, sharing this information is understood as an additional duty or responsibility associated with being an online fan fiction author. FFN might interactively position them as authors, but in order to fulfill their rights and duties, such as interacting, collaborating, and offering constructive criticism, the participants need to (re)position themselves as authors *with particular preferences* in order to “warn off anybody” who does not agree with those pairings. What romantic pairings someone prefers might seem like a frivolous matter to outsiders, but these fans are passionate about these preferences and their vision for what can and cannot be done with a text—for instance, what character pairings are ‘true’ to the nature of the source text and which ones might be too transgressive. Stating upfront an author’s generic and romantic pairings preferences constitutes “good” authorship and “good” writing; *not* stating up front what romantic pairings an author supports could potentially lead to ideological tensions among participants, which could in turn threaten the goals FFN and LJ has set forth for participants.

Such moments of ideological tension often occur around the practice of slash fiction and the differing attitudes concerning how much creative license is too much. Indeed, the study participants’ attempts to position themselves in relation to slash practices vis-à-vis the profile pages merits an extended conversation. As I have noted, in slash fiction authors take two heterosexual characters and pair them in homosexual romantic or sexual relationships. The popular pairing of Wilson and House is an example of slash fic. Thirty years after fan fiction writers began writing Kirk/Spock stories, slash remains a controversial genre. Thus, it has become standard practice for slash authors, as Rae points out, to warn readers who might be offended by their pairings.<sup>42</sup> Those study

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<sup>42</sup> During the time that I was writing this dissertation, I frequently returned to the fan fiction page on Wikipedia to see what new terms had been posted and how the definitions had evolved. On March 19, 2011, I noticed the addition of “Don’t like, don’t read” and this definition: “a play on ‘Don’t ask, don’t tell,’ this phrase is used by the author of a slash fic to warn that the story’s only appeal is that it describes homosexual behaviors, and thus only those who like slash fiction for its own sake will enjoy it.” The term

participants who write slash fiction are diligent in positioning themselves on their profile pages as slash authors, if only in passing. For example, KouTai creates a category called “Pairings (what I am into now),” in which she lists the pairings she supports, including “House/Cameron, House/Wilson, Wilson/Amber.” She does not offer any other commentary on these preferences, but attentive readers can determine from this list that she supports both heterosexual (House/Cameron and Wilson/Amber) and slash (House/Wilson) pairings and then decide whether or not they want to interact with her or read her fics. Not elaborating on her preferences is for KouTai a deliberate effort to position herself in relation to her practices. Her profile serves as a way to complicate her identity—as a way to fulfill her obligations as an author by announcing her preferences but also to present herself as more than just a slash author. She explains in her interviews why she does not elaborate on her slash practices on her profile page:

People can form their own opinions from what I write, but I would rather them try to see the real me and not ‘[KouTai] who writes slash because she’s gay’ or something to that effect. I want you to see past what I write and don’t try to make an image of me from that alone. I do write slash, because I enjoy it. End of story, folks. It is nothing deeper than that.

For KouTai, her generic preferences define her within this community only to a certain degree. She states them to indicate respect for the codes and conventions of fan fiction but adds other information about herself in an effort to help visitors see the “real” her rather than merely KouTai “‘who writes slash because she’s gay’ or something to that effect.”

As a point of comparison, Rae takes a different approach to positioning herself as a slash writer. She explains in her interviews that it is “not good to share too much personal information that doesn’t deal with fan fiction, as that can be dangerous and unnecessary,” and that she limits her biography to the information she determines essential to this particular writing community. That essential information includes an explicit “warning” about her slash practices: “WARNING: I am a slasher. 98[%] of the things I write will include male/male or female/female relationships. If this offends you, that’s your right, but go away. I don’t need to hear about it. Thanks.” This declaration

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reflects the continued and controversial conversations occurring across a variety of sectors, from the military to fan fiction.

further defines her as an author beyond the site's quantitative definition and also works, even in its rather defensive language, to maintain constructive rather than destructive communication among members. It is a response, she explains in her interviews, to participants who have through private messages or public feedback criticized her romantic pairings despite other indications she had made—including in the Author's Note—that she is a slash writer. In other words, they were not “rightfully” criticizing her writing, and thus she uses the profile page to reinforce her preferences and her position with regard to the source text and characters and with regard to the genre of slash. Likewise, FlightOfFenix also uses her profile page to position herself in relation to slash. She signals her preferences not only in terms of what she writes but also what she is willing to read and review:

I WILL NOT read/review the following:

*Slash/Fem-slash*

*Script form*

*Pairings I don't like*

*Fandoms I don't like*

The list serves to introduce not only her writing preferences but also her reading preferences. While the other study participants mention on their profile pages their reading practices in the context of what pop culture texts they read, FlightOFFenix is the only one to be explicit about her fan fiction reading practices. While her tone can be interpreted, like Rae's, as rather abrasive, ultimately this list benefits the group. By explicitly reinforcing the preferences that visitors might deduce by reading her author declaration or by scrolling to the bottom of the page to view the list of stories she has written, FlightOfFenix takes matters into her own hands to further enable connections with only those who share her preferences and to suppress other connections. By posting these warnings, Rae and FlightOFFenix position themselves within the general discursive and social practices of fan fiction, which are not necessarily dictated by FFN but which they have learned from lurking, reading, and writing fan fiction across multiple sites, and impose them on their practices within this particular site. The profiles, then, serve to facilitate communication among members so that, in some cases, members can steer clear of those whose practices do not align with their own. By including essential information such as their generic preferences, participants take it upon themselves to act as sponsors

of literacy to one another—recruiting, enabling, regulating, and suppressing practices in order to accomplish goals that align with those set forth by FFN, such as maintaining a writing environment that enables constructive literacy practices and suppresses those that might be hostile. These moments illustrate how participants are constantly interactively and reflexively positioned within the sponsored sites and also how participants co-construct and circulate fan fiction writing ideologies.

There are moments, however, when the site’s ideologies and the participants’ ideologies do not always align. In Rae’s efforts to reflexively position herself, she uses her page to explain her attitude toward editing and revising, which seems to breach two of FFN’s Codes: that posted content be thoroughly edited and that authors take suggestions for revisions from readers. She notes:

Most of my stuff is in rough form, and most of it will probably never get much revising. But I’m an experienced writer, and IMHO,<sup>43</sup> my writing comes out passably polished on the first few goes. And most of my fics are spur of the moment episode caps, so they’re supposed to capture my feelings in specific moments after shows air. Thus, rough is more genuine.

By suggesting that she will likely never revise her work, Rae risks offending those readers who subscribe to FFN’s ideology of lending a helping hand. She also risks rejecting FFN’s definition of what constitutes “good” writing and, related to that, “good” authorship. Yet she positions herself as an experienced writer who subscribes to the conventions of her chosen genre, “spur of the moment episode caps.” In this moment, she seems to privilege one value over another. She also seems to position those visiting her page as readers who will not just read her work but also offer constructive criticism with the assumption that she will want to revise her work. Still, she then attempts to amend any offense with this final note: “But feedback on errors or general quality stuff is ALWAYS appreciated. I try to keep an organic feeling about my work, but that doesn’t mean I want to ignore errors.” In this last part, she (re)positions herself as an author receptive to feedback, and ultimately reinforces the collaborative writing environment. Such moments reveal some participants’ efforts to use the profile page to reflect upon their literacy practices, to do so within the context of FFN, and to negotiate any potential

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<sup>43</sup> Text-speak for “In my humble opinion.”

ideological differences between sponsor and sponsored and among individual participants.

Other negotiations involve what roles from participants' off-screen lives to bring to the community. For instance, some of the study participants position themselves as college students, a move that might enhance their ethos as participants with certain skills and knowledge not just about a particular fandom but also about writing more generally. For others, this information is not important to share. Only four of the six study participants articulate this role on their profile pages; Kayla and Rae do not mention it. For Kayla, this is likely because she had taken a leave of absence from school; for Rae, this omission reflects her philosophy that she should share only information that she perceives relevant to the fan fiction community. She explains in her interviews:

It's good not to share too much personal information that doesn't deal with fan fiction, as that can be dangerous and unnecessary. We want to convey who we are as writers and readers of fan fiction. That is one aspect of our lives (though certainly interconnected with other parts of our lives). We're not necessarily trying to convey who we are as a complete personal [sic] in the outside world.

While Rae sees fan fiction as “certainly interconnected” with other parts of her life, she does not mention those other parts of her life on her profile page, even if they might enhance her roles as reader and writer. However, KouTai uses her profile page as an opportunity to discuss her commitment to reading and writing beyond fan fiction, and mentions that she is a college student. She notes: “I am eighteen and a freshman at UTC. [...] I love to write and read. Writing is my passion and has been so for years now. I am an English major, and that might end up changing. I hope not.” By mentioning her student status, and more specifically her English major, KouTai might bolster her credibility not just as a fan fiction author but as someone who writes in multiple sites and contexts. Noting that she is a student and an English major conveys to her audience that she is an experienced writer who might offer insight from other sites of literacy and other discourses related to writing, like the composition classroom, that she could help other participants meet some of the site's more conventional requirements. Furthermore, introducing herself as a college student in her bio is part of her ongoing effort to convey the “real” KouTai beyond that of a slash writer—to complicate her ethos.

Finally, returning to the top of KouTai's profile page, it is essential not to overlook the advertisement located in the top right-hand corner, and it is here that I return to the conversation I started earlier in the chapter about commercial sponsorship and the suppression of literacy practices. Advertisements on profile pages are explicit reminders of the presence of commercial sponsorship within this site of literacy and of participants' roles as consumers. The advertisements—in this case, for the movie *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*—constantly rotate, promoting the commercial sponsors that make it possible for FFN and LJ to operate. In both sites, participants can temporarily block or modify the ads that appear when they log on. In FFN, they can use Ad Blocker to remove all ads, but this is a temporary fix that lasts only twenty-four hours. After that, participants have to once again go to their preferences and disable the ads for another twenty-four hours. In LJ, ads appear on all pages; however, participants can customize these ads, choosing which ones appear when they log on according to five categories of advertising that interest them most. The categories are broad and include Arts & Humanities, Music, Internet & Media, Charities, Politics & Social Advocacy, and Health & Wellness.

The ability to modify or suppress the presence of sponsorship reflects the sites' efforts to accommodate both the sponsors' and sponsoreds' agendas. The commercial sponsors have to exist in order for the space to survive and thrive, but they can have a minimal impact on the users' everyday experiences within the site. While I was acutely aware of the presence of this commercial sponsorship during the year I spent studying fan fiction sites, the participants in the study make little mention of it. Their silence on the matter is perhaps not surprising; as Brandt notes, the sponsored can be "oblivious to or innovative with this ideological burden" as they have likely grown accustomed to acquiring "literacy pragmatically under the banner of others' causes" ("Sponsors" 168). They seem to accept that "consumer" would be one role, among others, that they assume within these sites, perhaps because advertisements appear on nearly every online site they visit and are thus constant if not invisible companions in their online traversals. They can suppress this consumer role to some degree, but consumerism nevertheless remains constantly bound up with literacy. After all, commercial sponsors enable literacy by financially supporting the sites. They also exert their power by regulating literacy. In

television and radio industries, sponsors have the power to rescind their financial support if they do not agree with the networks' decisions or if they feel offended by the content. So it goes with online sites: commercial sponsors can pull their funding if they disagree with the rules and regulations of the sites. These tensions indicate the complex and circular negotiations involved in supporting multiple competing agendas: to respond to the demands of an increasingly visible and vibrant participatory culture like that of fan fiction but also to protect those other participants who might be offended by the activities of this culture and recruit and maintain commercial sponsors who, in turn, enable the literacy practices.<sup>44</sup> The presence of advertisers illustrates an explicit level of sponsorship; the advertisers are those who quite literally sponsor the site. This means that when participants register for these sites they become engaged, however actively or passively, in the consumer environment created by the presence of advertisers on social networking sites. Brandt explains that the term "sponsors" proved an appealing term in her analysis because of all the commercial references that appeared in the "magazines, peddled encyclopedias, essay contests, radio and television programs, toys, fan clubs, writing tools, and so on, from which so much experience with literacy was derived" ("Sponsors" 168) for the people she interviewed. She notes that as the twentieth century "turned the abilities to read and write into widely exploitable resources," commercial sponsorship abounded (168), and online sites like FFN and LJ that host fan fiction practices offer evidence of this persistent commercial presence in sites of literacy. The presence of these commercial sponsors on profile pages and blogs is a reminder that hierarchies exist, in contrast to Black's assertion, within these sites of literacy, and that violations of certain rules and regulations can result in the suppression of literacy. They also illustrate how ideologically fraught these sites can be: how the agents present within—the site, the advertisers, the individual participants—are expected to amicably co-exist or at least to tolerate one another, and the potential for tensions to arise when one agent's definition of literacy conflicts with another's. And while fan fiction participants do not profit from their literacy practices, the ads are reminders that others are indeed

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<sup>44</sup> During the year I studied these sites of literacy, LiveJournal was involved in a rather public negotiation as it attempted to accommodate the rights of a clique of *Harry Potter* erotica writers whose "outré tastes ran afoul" (Thomas) of the site's efforts to comply with U.S. child-pornography laws and created a "distasteful" environment to advertisers.

profiting from these practices, from the site managers to the Hollywood movie industry that posts its ads to this rather captive audience. These are just some of the examples of participants working within the ideological congestion that characterizes these online sites of literacy. While the connections to composition classrooms are more tenuous when considering commercial advertising as a literacy sponsor, this example usefully illustrates the possible range of hierarchies and reminds composition instructors to consider powerful, but possibly unnoticed, literacy sponsors that might exist in the classroom—from textbooks and technology to the department and institution. By noting the explicit and implicit presence of sponsors, students can better grasp the social relations and power dynamics and bear these in mind as they position themselves within the community and take up roles and practices.

In the following section, I transition from analyzing a profile page in FFN to analyzing a blog in LJ to compare how participants are interactively and reflexively positioned within a different site of literacy with different values and beliefs. As I have noted, several participants have accounts in FFN as well as LJ, and they move between the two sites according to their needs. LJ is much less heavy-handed in its positioning of participants through its template, and it recruits those who want more freedom both in terms of how they position themselves in the community vis-à-vis the template and the content they can post. Current research on fan fiction communities does not offer comparison across sites—a missed opportunity in terms of understanding what readers and writers look for when they go searching for communities in an increasingly competitive Web 2.0 fan fiction market.

#### Example 2: Cam's LJ blog

Because LJ is a social networking site that hosts thousands of different interests, it does not provide templates that are specific to the practice of fan fiction. LJ's more relaxed approach to sponsorship means that participants are given a standard template that supports their blogging practices—that is, it allows them to post time-stamped entries and receive responses to those entries—that they can then customize to represent their fan fiction practices. The FFN template is fairly rigid, positioning participants within particular roles and reinforcing rules and roles the site feels are important to the practice

of fan fiction. In LJ, unless participants join fan fiction sub-communities and then design pages to position themselves within those rules and roles, they are free to decide what they include on their pages and how they organize their content. Absent are any mandatory quantitative declarations of authorship and any required statements of nationality or of roles assumed within the site or lists of fandoms or favorites. In fact, LJ's self-described "user-friendly interface and deeply customizable journal" along with its tolerance for content deemed inappropriate in other fan fiction sites helped it recruit some of the study participants. The lack of perceived constraints affords participants, especially those more experienced in fan fiction, the opportunity to determine how to convey their fan fiction practices and then how to enable those practices within the sprawling and diverse blog community.

However, this does not mean that the study participants completely ignore the standard codes and conventions that have come to be associated more generally with online fan fiction. Cam's LJ homepage (see Figure 4.5) illustrates how she transfers skills and dispositions from one site to another, even when she is not necessarily prompted by the template or the rules of the site to do so:

Figure 4.5: Partial Screenshot of Cam’s LJ Homepage



In order to signal that she is a fan fiction writer, Cam places at the top of her page large images of Neil Patrick Harris (*How I Married Your Mother*), Mark Harmon (*NCIS*), and Michael Weatherly (*NCIS*). In doing so, she borrows codes and conventions from other fan sites: posting icons and images that reflect her preferences. She also borrows other standard conventions. Beneath “BananaCosmic,” one of her pseudonyms, she lists her fandoms, including *House*, *Harry Potter*, and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and then categories that she created to organize her practices and convey information to visitors: “CosmicUniverse” (a link to her own website), “Recent Entries,” “Archive,” “Cosmic Friends,” and “Cosmic Info.” The lack of consistent design across the pages offers opportunities as well as constraints: while Cam could organize the page according to her own beliefs and values, the lack of unity across the pages in LJ, compared to FFN, means

that visitors might have to search harder to locate the information they need or determine the experiences of a participant, which in turn might hinder interactions.

In keeping with the rights and duties associated with fan fiction authorship, Cam warns visitors of material (in this case, rather graphic sex scenes) that might offend them: “You are about to view content that may not be appropriate for minors.” The screenshot below (Figure 4.6) captures Cam’s adherence to generic conventions and circulating ideologies in and among a template that affords her much more control over what information she includes and how she conveys it.

**Figure 4.6: Cam’s LJ Page—Generic Conventions**



11 may 2010 @ 04:39 pm

NCIS Awards and very, very short update :)

( You are about to view content that may not be appropriate for minors. )

tags: fandom: ncis, me me methings, random things are random

4 comments | comments are love



17 april 2010 @ 02:04 pm

Art: Sleepy boys (Ted/Barney)

( You are about to view content that may not be appropriate for minors. )

tags: fandom: himym, pretty: art, slash

On Kit’s LJ blog, she includes photos of her favorite actors to further enhance her identity as a fan, and a “tag” list that situates her in a variety of practices and identities not necessarily related to *House*, including “college,” “anime,” “finals,” and “writer’s

block.”<sup>45</sup> Both Cam and Kit provide more information about their lives beyond fan fiction on LJ than on FFN, in part because they situate their fan fiction practices within their other everyday practices—as illustrated by Cam’s entry labeled “Stupidly funny stuff.” LJ, as a blogging community that hosts a variety of topics and interests, offers evidence of literacy abilities nested in and sustained by larger social and cultural activity. It offers evidence that reading and writing, as Brandt notes, continues to occur instrumentally as part of broader activities such as working, worshipping, governing, teaching and learning, and participating in pop culture (*Literacy* 3). While participants can mention these activities on their FFN pages and perhaps provide links to external sites, in LJ they can co-exist within the same space. To return to Fiske for a moment, in LJ fan fiction participants can more easily merge their *semiotic*, *enunciative*, and *textual* fannish practices (“Cultural”); they can store their artwork, videos, and fan fiction all in one space while linking up with sub-communities and also blogging about their off-screen, non-fanfic lives. In other words, LJ’s ideologies allows for much more flexibility, for better or worse, when it comes to defining authorship and writing.

What should be compelling for composition instructors is how many participants seek out sites that have considerable overlap in terms of writing ideologies, but that differ so much in terms of regulation and suppression. It is easy to explain away students’ high level of engagement in their extracurricular literacy practices as having to do with a lack of requirements or accountability, but FFN and LJ are not lawless sites of literacy where participants can do as they please. Granted, the “laws” differ between the curriculum and the extracurriculum and even between the two sites, but these two fan fiction sites illustrate that participants are held accountable for their practices. My research reveals how participants consider the affordances and limitations of both sites in terms of the rules as well as the available social and material conditions, illustrating what seems like rather sophisticated navigation of sponsorship that can prove useful to them when, for instance, they enter into a new site of literacy. In the following section, I continue articulating the relevance of fan fiction for composition studies.

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<sup>45</sup> In 2005, LJ introduced tags as a new organizational feature: “Tags let you organize your entries into categories so that you and your friends can quickly find related entries in your journal. For example, you could tag all of your entries about your pet cat Gabe with “gabe” and “pets”, then anybody who goes to your journal can read all of your entries about your fluffy ball of terror.”

## Conclusion

Online fan fiction sites like FFN and LJ offer evidence of participants, including student writers, engaged in ideological negotiations in their everyday literacy practices. FFN and LJ are learning environments that sponsor writing instruction where “monitorial citizens” (Jenkins, *Convergence*) deliberate and collaborate not only about *House, M.D.* but also about the processes of reading, writing, and responding. A framework of literacy sponsorship provides the means for examining how emerging sites of literacy in Web 2.0 recruit, enable, regulate, and suppress literacy and, in the process, attempt to establish writing ideologies that, for instance, emphasize constructive rather than anonymous or hostile interaction. Positioning theory deepens this understanding of sponsorship by revealing the agents and the constant interactive and reflexive positioning as well as ideological negotiating that occurs in sites of literacy. Through the registration process, the sites position participants; through the profile pages and homepages, participants can then reflexively position themselves while reinforcing and reshaping the site’s ideologies once they have initially agreed to the terms.

Indeed, the potential for Brandt’s work in an era that has ushered in “new” literacy practices has been to take this concept of literacy sponsorship and to determine, in Web 2.0, how sponsors and sponsored work together (or not) to co-construct writing ideologies. The profile pages and homepages are examples of emerging literacy practices, increasingly required in order for participants to more fully engage in Web 2.0 sites of literacy. They serve practical as well as ideological purposes: for instance, the links included on the profile pages make it easier for participants to interact with one another; they can click on the list of stories archived at the bottom of one another’s pages to read and comment on those stories, or they can click on the “email” or “beta” links to send each other private messages. These interactions can lead to collaborations. Furthermore, by requiring participants to fill out profile pages, the site positions reflection as an important part of the literacy experience. The level of reflection is not consistent across participants, of course; some participants offer very little information about themselves, while others, like the six study participants, provide important information about their literacy practices that can help facilitate constructive rather than destructive interactions. The profile pages also provide a space for participants to reflect on their practices and to

negotiate or nuance the rules and roles according to their own experiences and values. Kit, Cam, Kayla, KouTai, FlightofFenix, and Rae all agreed to the conditions of FFN, and from my observations of their literacy activities—from maintaining their profile pages to offering advice to others to writing their own stories—they adhere to them.

The profile pages and blog pages help to initially position participants in the community. They enable a particular form of fan fiction literacy, one that promotes both social interaction and inward reflection, and also provide a place for participants to constantly return to (re)position themselves according to their ongoing reflections on their literacy practices. Creating and then maintaining pages are duties and responsibilities associated with participating in these online networks; they serve practical as well as ideological purposes, and constitute literacy practices unto themselves. The pages prompt participants entering the site to immediately negotiate the conventions of evolving genres and to demonstrate an awareness of audience.<sup>46</sup> As a descendent of traditional author bio pages, the profile page is not necessarily a new genre. It is, however, an evolving genre within the emerging sites of Web 2.0, and it offers evidence of writers attempting to negotiate as well as shape conventions within sites of literacy: the static features and prompts on the template position participants to be interactive and reflective. These are important activities for those scholars studying the new communities emerging online and the ways in which, as Bawarshi explains, “existing genres not only enable individuals to shape social and rhetorical practices, but also transform them, so that new genres emerge out of contact with those already in use, and evolve as they reflect changing values and assumptions” (10). As such, they merit attention from scholars in the fields of literacy and composition.

FFN’s and LJ’s invitation to participants to co-construct and circulate ideologies based on their own experiences in fandoms as well as in writing is part of the recruitment effort. In Web 2.0 literacy, it is not enough to simply invite participants to work within

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<sup>46</sup> This audience includes those within and beyond the site. For instance, participants have to reveal enough to establish connections, but also have to bear in mind the hazards of revealing too much such that they become vulnerable to cyberspace predators. Rae’s comment that disclosing too much personal information could be “dangerous or unnecessary” reflects increasingly common concerns regarding users’ safety in online spaces. Like Rae, Cam avoids sharing certain kinds of information to protect her privacy: “I try not to give away so much as for it to be possible to identify me by reading my profile. I am proud of the work I do, so that’s not the reason why I don’t want to be identified—it is simply a way of staying safe online.”

the rules; they must also feel like they have a say in how the community functions while still respecting the rules that will maintain a constructive writing environment.

Interestingly, by encouraging participants to set up profile pages and then giving them the tools and opportunities to, say, mobilize into groups according to their fanfic interests and to engage in conversations with one another about *House, M.D.*, the social and rhetorical conventions of fan fiction, and other topics, the site invites participants to shape the practices. Allowing this kind of power helps sponsors remain responsive to participants' needs and also helps them remain relevant in an increasingly competitive fanfic market where new sites with new tools and new opportunities are constantly emerging and threatening to entice participants away from the site.

This act of empowering the participants is one of the key findings from this chapter that is relevant to composition instructors. Indeed, the findings from this chapter suggest that composition instructors should aim to make students literacy sponsors in the classroom; to empower them by teaching them to realize that there are agents (and with those agents, agendas) present within any site of literacy; by modeling for them how to assess the ideologies that recruit, enable, regulate, and suppress literacy; and by helping them position themselves among these agents and ideologies so that they can in turn help others to do the same. The sites I discuss in this project have learned that to recruit participants they have to allow them to participate in the construction and circulation of writing ideologies and their own positioning (through the affordance of multiple positive and flexible roles). Participants' role in these processes both reflects and creates investment and interest in the site. Allowing students to be sponsors in composition classrooms means considering the roles available to them, which should extend beyond that of student to include other roles and the associated rights, duties, and obligations. It also means involving them in the process of defining the ideologies of the classroom—asking them, for example, a series of questions that would help them position themselves in the composition classroom: What does “good” writing look like? What are the goals of the class? What are your goals for the class, and do they align with those of the institution? What kinds of activities would enable or suppress literacy in this site? What skills and experiences do you bring to this site? These kinds of questions can promote critical literacy within the classroom and beyond.

The commonalities of writing ideologies across FFN and LJ—the focus on collaboration, constructive feedback, and reflexivity—are telling in their allure to participants. Composition instructors and scholarship has long touted the importance of these very tenets; however, having evidence that students also value these practices in the extracurriculum highlights their importance in our classrooms. Perhaps more surprising is the participants’ nearly complete acceptance of correctness as a definition of “good” writing and authorship—and also their efforts to expand the definition of correctness to include more global concerns, such as character development. However, as I mention, if FFN’s rules do not support the community and reflect their values, fans might go to other sites. Thus, even correctness is seen as a regulation that ultimately supports participants’ literacy practices. An in-class analysis of sponsors and sponsored writing ideologies, including the purpose and effect, could allow for a rich discussion about generic conventions, including students’ participation in shaping these conventions when they interact with particular genres. Students can then critically engage with literacy practices within the curriculum and extracurriculum. I continue providing questions to pose to students as well as ideas for assignments in the following chapters.

Ultimately, learning how college students navigate online literacy practices and sites and their purposeful positioning within these sites as well as their role in co-constructing writing ideologies is of great value to composition instructors who often aim to engage students in literacy production and reception in the classroom, but to have it make meaning outside of the classroom. As the examples from this chapter show, students working in alternative sites of literacy embrace values and viewpoints about writing that are consonant with those promoted in composition classrooms, and do so reflexively. Using this knowledge and asking students to be reflective about their extracurricular practices and the values they embrace offers a different kind of conversation about and engagement with the generic conventions and expectations we will ask them to accept and operate within when writing for the academy.

In the next chapter, I continue my conversation about sponsorship and positioning in fan fiction sites by focusing on the role of beta readers and on the processes of offering feedback through private exchanges and public comments. I examine how betas attempt to reinforce ideologies established by the sites while also positioning themselves vis-à-vis

the beta profile pages as readers with particular skills, knowledge, and preferences that influence the ways in which they read and respond to other participants' work. This analysis adds to my argument about what composition instructors can take note of that would be of value to their pedagogies.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### NEGOTIATING WRITING IDEOLOGIES THROUGH ROLES AND FEEDBACK

#### **Introduction**

In this chapter, I examine the sponsorship of feedback as it occurs in each of the sites of study, FFN and LJ. As I explain in Chapter Four, I determined during the coding stages of my research that the roles and practices involved in the process of providing feedback within these peer-to-peer communities were so salient that they merited their own chapter. A framework of sponsorship combined with positioning theory reveals: how during the feedback process participants continue to (re)position themselves vis-à-vis their beta profile pages and their interactions and collaborations with others; how participants negotiate ideologies circulating within the sites; and how authors' goals for feedback do not always align with what betas and reviewers ultimately provide. The significance of these findings for the field of composition is that they offer evidence of student writers in action, coming to understand, for example, what constitutes "good" writing and "good" feedback in fan fiction generally, *House M.D.* fan fiction specifically, and for themselves. I argue throughout this chapter that composition instructors can look to the extracurriculum for insight into how feedback occurs and to better understand how the beliefs and dispositions students develop in these alternative sites of literacy—that is, their emerging writing ideologies—might inform their practices, such as peer workshopping, within the classroom.

As I state in Chapter Four, FFN's registration process encourages participants to "lend a helping hand," and the site's templates for the profile pages facilitate that connection by providing links to stories and participants. As the participants explain in their interviews, in LJ, the "comment" feature and inherently interactive nature of the blog enable feedback. Additionally, the roles of *beta reader* and *reviewer* and the associated rights, duties, and obligations that I began to describe in Chapter Four become

more prominent in the process of providing feedback. Given that FFN and LJ do little day-to-day monitoring of literacy practices, the feedback process has implications for not only the individual participants but also the sponsors as it, like the registration process and page templates, serves to recruit, enable, regulate, and suppress literacy among individual participants and, at times, to reinforce the ideologies of the two sites—as well other ideologies in circulation that ultimately inform practice. For example, through feedback, participants can support one another in achieving the ideological goals of the fan fiction site, such as interaction, reflection, and correctness in spelling and grammar; additionally, as I demonstrate below, feedback can help participants master the conventions of *House, M.D.* fan fiction, which emphasize accuracy in both character development and medical scenarios. As KouTai explains:

When you write [...] for *House, M.D.*, you are expected to understand the world of *House*. The medical terms and the patients and the doctors. The differences between relationships. The past events...you have to know it all. Each character has their characterization. You're expected to keep it in context, to be able to switch from one character to another without losing the way they work. It's complicated.

In the process of reviewing and offering feedback, participants attempt to help one another attend to these “complicated” expectations and interactively position one another within multiple circulating ideologies. As such, they function as peer literacy sponsors—a role that composition instructors often ask students to assume, even if we do not invoke Brandt’s term and even if we do not use positioning theory to describe the rights, duties, and obligations bound up in that role. As I demonstrate in this chapter, literacy sponsorship and positioning theory make explicit the agents, dispositions, and practices involved in the process of providing feedback in fan fiction sites, and I argue that composition instructors can use this combination as well to frame conversations about the process of providing feedback in the classroom.

As I note elsewhere in this dissertation, the scholarship on fan fiction that focuses on beta readers and feedback has tended to be overly positive. In this chapter, I highlight the moments when participants are remarkably reflective about their practices as well as their efforts to create a supportive writing environment for one another. However, I balance this analysis by also describing the inconsistencies and shortcomings that

undermine practices as well as participants' criticism leveled at the beta and comments systems. There has been little scholarly attention paid to these inconsistencies, shortcomings, and criticisms, yet they provide insight into how student writers negotiate ideologies in their sites of literacy and how these negotiations may influence their understanding of the composing process—from reflecting to writing to reading to responding. As such, they are crucial to advancing conversations about literacy instruction as it occurs across different sites of literacy.

I begin my analysis by examining how participants negotiate ideologies related to interaction, collaboration, constructive criticism, reflection, and correctness through the process of feedback. This examination focuses on the role of beta readers and the beta profile page. I then explore the sites' and participants' goals for feedback and analyze how the two different sites sponsor feedback—noting, for instance, how LJ seems to enable more substantive feedback compared to FFN. I use my interviews with the study participants to supplement my analysis of beta reader profile pages and instances of feedback (both beta reader responses and public reviews). I conclude by suggesting that composition instructors learn from sites like those devoted to fan fiction in order to facilitate critical literacy skills, including collaboration, “concrit,” and reflection.

## **Negotiating Writing Ideologies**

### *Beta and Sponsor Negotiations*

Beta readers act as peer sponsors of literacy through their feedback. Within the discourse community of fan fiction, they are the “critical mass of experts who are able to introduce new members to the shared project and conventions of the community” (Bizzell, *Academic* 225-6). The beta profile pages offer unique opportunities to study how this particular subset of participants position themselves and how they attempt to align or even disassociate themselves with the circulating ideologies. Therefore, I focus this section on an examination of the role of beta reader primarily through analysis of several study participants' beta profile pages. I begin by describing the role of beta reader in more detail and the requirements for becoming a beta reader in each site.

Fan fiction sites often function as peer-to-peer learning environments, and beta readers are reflexively and interactively positioned as official instructors.<sup>47</sup> I say “official” since, as I demonstrate later in the chapter, all members within the community can leave feedback and advise authors, but betas are recognized as working within a more official capacity. FFN describes a beta as someone “who reads a work of fiction with a critical eye, with the aim of improving grammar, spelling, characterization, and general style of a story prior to its release to the general public,” and this definition is consonant with others offered within the discourse of fan fiction. Beta readers are understood by the sites and the other participants to be highly knowledgeable not just about the source text but also about writing. Accordingly, FFN and LJ position betas as expert fans and writers who reinforce the ideologies established by the site in the registration process, especially related to what constitutes “good” writing, the ideologies related to fan fiction, and the ideologies specific to the source text—in this case, *House, M.D.*

As I mention in Chapter Four, LJ does not provide rules dictating who can serve as beta readers. Because LJ is not strictly a fan fiction community, nowhere does it describe this role or stipulate any requirements. Therefore, anyone who wants to serve as a beta reader can, unless they do not meet the qualifications specific to a certain sub-community. However, in the stricter environment of FFN, betas must qualify for the role by having been registered within the site for at least one month and having published at least five stories or having published entries—in the form of feedback or comments contributed to forums and communities—“totaling at least 6,000 words.” Requiring that participants be registered members for one month ensures, ideally, that the participants have agreed to the conditions that dictate the roles and responsibilities within the site and that participants have spent some time in the site, reading stories and observing the interactions among participants and getting to know the community. That FFN seems inclined to describe participants’ experiences in quantifiable terms—how many stories they have authored, how many months they have been registered, how many words they

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<sup>47</sup> Not all fanfic sites consider themselves learning environments. For example, the Republic of Pemberley, a site devoted to Jane Austen fiction, does not present itself as a learning environment and, in fact, in its codes of conduct discourages participants from offering instruction: “Don’t correct people’s grammar or spelling, please. The threat of being corrected may impede discourse, and we want people to feel comfortable here.”

have written—suggests it equates quantity with quality, a potentially problematic assumption. Yet this emphasis on time and number of words written may also be the site’s way of conveying to participants the importance of indwelling, so to speak, in the community before taking on additional roles and responsibilities. The publishing criterion communicates to participants that leaving the occasional one- or two-word review will not suffice. In these ways, FFN attempts to recruit beta readers who are committed and interactive participants and who will reinforce the site’s ideology, particularly its emphasis on interaction and collaboration. Furthermore, the qualifications for beta readers aim to create a legitimate writing environment—that is, a writing environment in which recognizable composing processes such as revision, collaboration, and feedback are visible, particularly to skeptical outsiders who doubt the integrity of fan fiction—by recruiting and promoting experienced writers into positions of authority who can help develop authors’ skills, and in the process potentially increase the quality of work across the site. In this sense, the fact that just anyone can be a beta reader in LJ is a double-edged sword in terms of recruiting as well as enabling and regulating literacy: those who do not want to go through the steps of proving their experiences and skills could flock to LJ and dive right into beta-ing. This process is enabling to the beta, but could perhaps be undermining to those who seek his or her “expertise.” Furthermore, other participants could be turned off if there is not a vetting process and if there is no system in place for easily locating experienced betas.<sup>48</sup>

FFN uses the role of beta reader as an incentive: those participants who demonstrate a high level of commitment (measured mostly in quantitative terms) to the site and fan fiction can then take on more responsibility by becoming beta readers. Offering this position of power is one way online fan fiction sites “wield powerful incentives for compliance and loyalty” (Brandt, “Sponsors” 3), serving to recruit participants and also enable and regulate literacy. From a sponsorship standpoint, the site helps participants position themselves—primarily through beta profile pages—as sponsors of literacy, co-constructing along with the site an ideology of writing fan fiction

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<sup>48</sup> The differences in beta criterion between FFN and LJ did not come up in my interviews with the study participants. Rather, they were much more interested in discussing the differences in feedback when it came to the public comments.

that emphasizes not only accuracy but also clear communication and attention to generic conventions and community expectations. For example, one way the beta profile page—another requirement of FFN for all beta readers—enables literacy and positions beta readers to be interactive and reflective is by first asking betas-to-be to include contact information and links to their non-FFN sites (see Figure 5.1 for a screen shot of the top of KouTai’s beta profile page). In fact, the top of the page resembles the member profile form and also includes a statement of authorship that, once again, serves a practical purpose: to let those participants looking for beta readers know what fandoms the beta has written for and to indicate, at least numerically, how experienced the author is—not in *editing*, as one might expect on a beta profile page, but rather in *writing* fan fiction. Again, the site’s impulse to quantify reinforces the criteria that beta readers must have some experience either writing fan fiction or participating in the FFN community. That there is no statement of beta-ship, so to speak, which quantifies the number of stories a beta has edited seems to suggest that the site privileges experience in writing and interacting with participants via public reviews and communities over actual experience beta-ing. Such privileging in turn suggests that betas gain their expertise or qualifications by being writers; that to be a “good” beta reader, one must have had the experience of having actually written for the fandom and within the genre, to have had first-hand experience in the production and circulation of texts within a particular rhetorical situation before they can help others. This moment illustrates how the site enables participants, directly and indirectly, to assume the rights, duties, and responsibilities associated with the role of beta reader. If the process of beta reading compares to the process of peer workshopping, moments like these can offer insight into students’ experiences with and dispositions toward peer feedback in other sites of literacy and perhaps provide new ideas for how instructors can sponsor such interactions in their own classrooms.

While the template quantifies the number of stories a beta has written, it then prompts the beta-to-be to narrate their writing and reviewing experiences in the “Beta Description” section of the page, providing the following prompts to help guide their reflection: Beta Bio, My Strengths, My Weaknesses, Preferred, and Would Rather Not. These required prompts assume that *all* authors have strengths, weaknesses, and

preferences, and that these are important to be able to articulate both because they help participants be reflective about their own practices and because the site wants the participants to realize they may influence their ability to provide other authors the kind of feedback they need and want.

For example, KouTai uses her beta profile page to position herself—though perhaps not as clearly as she could have—as a beta (and, presumably, a writer, given the connections the template makes between writing and beta-ing) who attends to both local and global concerns. Under the heading “Preferred,” KouTai suggests that she is concerned about being familiar with the fandom and source texts. This familiarity means that she can comment on global concerns, such as characterization and content, and not just on local concerns, such as spelling and grammar. She also notes that she likes “style” and stories that “stick to the true character, or what the character seems.” The importance of staying “true” to the characters, or not going out-of-character (OOC), is an important fan fiction convention, and in their interviews the participants mention it frequently when they articulate their own writing ideologies and what constitutes “good” fan fiction.

**Figure 5.1: KouTai’s FFN Beta Profile Page**

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**KouenTaisa 's Beta Reader Profile**

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action : [✉ Send Message](#) . [🔔 Subscribe](#) . [★ Favorite](#)

profile : [👤 Member Profile](#)

forums : [🗨 My Forums](#)

email : [✉ Email](#)

since : 09-09-05, id: 894452

web : [🏠 Homepage](#)

Author has written [78](#) stories for Harry Potter, Fullmetal Alchemist, Saiyuki, Samurai Champloo, Naruto, Peacemaker Kurogane, Fire Emblem, Chrno Crusade, Inuyasha, Gilmore Girls, Tsubasa Chronicle, Batman the Animated Series, Grey's Anatomy, Cowboy Bebop, Pirates of the Caribbean, Fruits Basket, House, M.D., Twilight, Law and Order: SVU, Ouran High School Host Club, and Dragon Ball Z.

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**β** : KouenTaisa is a registered beta reader and is currently **accepting** beta reading requests.

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**Beta Description**

**Beta Bio:** general description as a beta reader  
I like style. Stories that stick to the true character, or what the character seems. I am very picky when it comes to grammar and spelling. Form isn't my main goal, unless there is something that does not make sense at all.

**My Strengths:** beta, writing, or reading strengths  
Grammar and Spelling.

**My Weaknesses:** beta, writing, or reading weaknesses  
Form

**Preferred:** types of entries I prefer over others  
I would prefer to beta stories in which I know the background of the series.

**Would Rather Not:** types of entries I do not want to beta for  
... only if I do not know enough about them.

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KouTai and Kayla both note the role of the beta reader in helping writers fulfill this generic convention:

I would get annoyed with some of the OOC fics out there, especially the ones in fandoms that I love. The *Harry Potter* fandom has tons of these fics, since it is one of the most popular fandoms on ff.net. I kept thinking that if these people had access to a beta, then maybe the fics wouldn't be as OOC.

Kayla's quotation makes clear the importance of true characterization—seemingly a global concern in the world of fan fiction—as breaking this convention might “annoy” readers.

Returning to KouTai, it is important to note that she does not position herself as only interested in global writing issues. She also aligns herself with the site's emphasis on sentence-level correctness, such as correct grammar and spelling, by noting that she is “picky” about these local concerns. In fact, while the global concern of accurate

characterization may have been KouTai's utmost criteria for "good" writing, she seems to prioritize grammar over form, or local over global, when she mentions "form" (twice) on her beta profile page in order to say that it was not her "main goal"—"unless there is something that does not make sense at all"—and even casts it as a "weakness" of hers. While KouTai never clearly defines *form* on the beta profile page, she notes in her interviews that she is referring to structure or organization. This moment reflects a potential flaw in the system: while the site requires betas to fill out the page, there is otherwise no one to supervise or help participants clarify their responses, leaving room for misunderstandings and disconnects. It is possible that authors seeking a beta might press KouTai to define her terms, but unless her responses are flagged as somehow offensive, she may not feel compelled to revise her responses in order to better facilitate interaction. Throughout this chapter, I discuss both the opportunities and the pitfalls of the beta system, noting when it has the potential to foster conversations about if and how composition instructors set up students to be peer sponsors of literacy.

In addition to reflecting on their strengths and weaknesses, betas are also prompted to both narrate their preferences ("Preferences" and "Would Rather Not") and categorize them (see Figure 5.2 for a screen shot of KouTai's Beta Preferences). In the "Categories" and "Genres" sections, participants can enhance their roles as betas by listing the source texts and genres for which they have authored, indicating their knowledge of the content as well as their experience writing for a particular source text and, as a result, familiarity with the possible challenges writers might face. On her profile page, KouTai notes that she is known for writing "angst," and on her beta profile page she lists that genre but also other genres in which she has written. In this way, participants use the member profile in conjunction with the beta profile to create a fuller picture of themselves as authors, fans, and betas and to demonstrate their knowledge. Additionally, noting that she is willing to beta everything from K, which is content suitable for "most ages," to M, which is content suitable for "mature teens and older," but not MA, which contains "explicit content for mature adults only," is important. If participants articulate these preferences upfront, they might reduce the risk of offending others, thereby setting themselves up to engage in constructive rather than destructive criticism and ultimately contribute to a supportive writing community. Maintaining a

“supportive writing community” is fundamental to many of the circulating ideologies, as illustrated by the presumed goal of the beta page and the participants’ attention to stating their preferences on the beta profile page and also on the member profile page. A point worth noting is that a “supportive writing community” seems to involve beta readers stating preferences, not just providing feedback. The relevance for composition studies might be in thinking about how instructors and students define what constitutes a supportive writing community—for example, what roles, expectations, and responsibilities are involved.

Likewise, whether or not it is the intention of the site, the template also serves as a means for beta readers to recruit authors; the more relationships they nurture with authors, the more their fan base and status has the potential to increase. The template in collaboration with KouTai’s reflections on her practices illustrate sponsorship and positioning at work to reinforce a writing ideology that emphasizes interaction as well as reflection, constructive social and discursive practices that serve to benefit the entire group.

**Figure 5.2: KouTai’s FFN Beta Preferences**

Beta Preferences			
Language: English			
Content Rating: Fiction K » M			
Categories: categories in black are ones this beta has authored for			
Cartoon » Batman the Animated Series	Tv » Gilmore Girls	Book » Harry Potter	
Anime » Fullmetal Alchemist	Tv » Grey's Anatomy	Tv » House, M.D.	
Genres: genres in black are ones this beta has authored for			
General	Adventure	Fantasy	Hurt/Comfort
Romance	Mystery	Tragedy	Friendship
Drama	Angst	Family	

In an effort to facilitate more constructive interactions, Cam uses her beta profile page (see Figure 5.3 for a screen shot) to specify the content she will and will not read. By doing so, she reinforces the importance of complementary ideologies between beta reader and writer that FFN works to establish. While Cam writes for seven fandoms, she limits herself to beta reading for only three fandoms: “I have only chosen three categories

to beta, and I'm up to speed on all three. I've seen all *NCIS* and *House* episodes at least twice, and I feel I have good grasp on the characters." By noting that she is "up to speed," has seen "all *NCIS* and *House* episodes at least twice," and has a "good grasp on the characters," she conveys her belief that beta readers should be knowledgeable when it comes to content and highlights her attention to characterization. She reinforces the latter in her statement, "I will tell you if I think a character is acting OOC, and if something doesn't make sense in your story." Likewise, she is clear about what stories and pairings she would read—and in this moment her ideology is consonant with that of the site:

I will only accept gen, and the following pairings:

- *NCIS*: Gibbs/DiNozzo, DiNozzo/McGee
- *House*: House/Wilson (other sub-pairings are accepted, but not as the main focus of the story)
- *H2O*: Zane/Rikki, Lewis/Cleo, Zane/Lewis (if the latter exists at all)

By "gen," Cam means stories that are acceptable for a general audience, including young adults. She supports heterosexual and slash pairings, which, as I note in Chapter Four, has become increasingly important information to share with other participants. Under "Would Rather Not," she echoes her preferred pairings and also notes that she will not beta PWP—also known as "Porn without plot" or "Plot? What plot?"—which are generally described as stories that contain little more than sexual interactions. Kayla, too, notes the genres she will not read: "I cringe at Mary-Sues. I really do. I have a hard time reading a story with one in it." Again, having participants state their literacy preferences is a way for FFN to help participants recognize that these preferences will likely inform their reading of a text and potentially make them more or less effective betas. What is interesting to think about is how this belief might reinforce potentially unproductive notions some students have about audience and reception. For instance, it may perpetuate their sense that students and instructors who disagree with them or who "don't like" something they write will not be fair, or "good," reviewers and graders of their work. And yet, the opportunity FFN provides for reflection on the ways readers' opinions might shape their readings seems productive and perhaps something composition instructors could draw upon, in more complex ways than having students state, "I don't like these genres, and so I won't read them." In the scholarship on the beta system, little is made of

either its potential ideological pitfalls or the ways in which it and other systems of feedback in alternative sites of literacy can inform conversations about feedback in the composition classroom.

**Figure 5.3: Cam’s FFN Beta Description**

Beta Description
<p><b>Beta Bio:</b> general description as a beta reader</p> <p>I will beta *complete* fics. I don't want to beta something you wrote yesterday, which is a start that might or might not get finished, because I strongly dislike unfinished stories.</p> <p>English isn't my first language (Swedish is), but I'm good with grammar and spelling, and I've been writing fanfics and original stories in English for the last ten years, which ought to mean I'm fairly adept at it.</p> <p>I have only chosen three categories to beta, and I'm up to speed on all three. I've seen all NCIS and House episodes at least twice, and I feel I have a good grasp on the characters.</p> <p>I have a busy real life, which means that I might say no to your beta request if I feel there's already too much on my plate. But feel free to ask, if you meet with my requirements.</p>
<p><b>My Strengths:</b> beta, writing, or reading strengths</p> <p>My sense of grammar and spelling is strong.</p> <p>I will tell you if I think a character is acting OOC, and if something doesn't make sense in your story. I am very honest and can be quite harsh when I beta, so if you can't handle that, please don't ask me to beta. I am highly unlikely to gush over your story; if encouragement and confetti is what you want thrown over you, please chose someone else.</p>
<p><b>My Weaknesses:</b> beta, writing, or reading weaknesses</p> <p>English isn't my first lanugage, so I won't always catch everything. I'm usually no good at coming up with ideas for what should happen in your story (I have enough trouble with that in my own stories).</p>
<p><b>Preferred:</b> types of entries I prefer over others</p> <p>I will only accept gen, and the following pairings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- NCIS: Gibbs/DiNozzo, DiNozzo/McGee</li><li>- House: House/Wilson (other sub-pairings are accepted, but not as the main focus of the story)</li><li>- H20: Zane/Rikki, Lewis/Cleo, Zane/Lewis (if the latter exists at all)</li></ul>
<p><b>Would Rather Not:</b> types of entries I do not want to beta for</p> <p>Anything but the above pairings. I won't beta PWPS, because I don't particularly enjoy them. Longer stories with a sex scene or two are fine.</p>

The beta template, like the profile template but in much more direct ways, prompts betas to reflect on their preferences. Reflecting within the context of the beta profile page is especially important, given the seemingly overlapping ideological suggestions that constructive interactions can occur if the values and dispositions of betas—as articulated through their profiles, descriptions, and preferences—and the participants align. Ultimately, this kind of open communication reinforces an ideology that values constructive and interactive feedback and suggests these work best when preferences align. Cam and Kayla attempt to make their preferences as clear as possible, much like Rae and FlightOfFenix do on their member profile pages, seemingly in an effort to ward off potential tensions, which both the site and participants suggest is a

crucial step in the process in order to achieve the kind of constructive feedback promoted by FFN and create or maintain community.

In the first part of this rather extensive section on how participants work within circulating writing ideologies, I have examined how FFN's template encourages participants to be explicit about their experiences and preferences as both fanfic writers and readers. With its member profile templates and beta profile templates, the site implies that reflection is a critical part of writing as well as providing feedback, and that articulating strengths, weaknesses, and preferences can prevent conflict or misunderstandings that might undermine not just "good" writing but also "good" feedback. In the second part, I continue examining the beta profile pages but focus on the beta bios, transitioning from analyzing how beta readers are interactively positioned by the site to analyzing how they interactively position themselves in relation to the other participants.

### *Beta and Participant Negotiations*

In order to achieve the writing ideology goal of constructive and interactive feedback, but also to ensure a supportive and reflective community of writers and fans, participants attempt to make clear to one another their writing ideologies. This happens, in part, when beta readers explicitly state their understanding of or approach to the role of beta reader. As an example, Cam cautions authors who might be too sensitive against choosing her as a beta:

I am very honest and can be quite harsh when I beta, so if you can't handle that, please don't ask me to beta. I am highly unlikely to gush over your story; if encouragement and confetti is what you want thrown over you, please chose [sic] someone else.

For Cam it is important to comment not just on her skills but also on what I call her "beta ethos"—that is, her style of working with others and responding to their texts. In this moment, Cam takes into consideration the content of fan fiction feedback—which, as I describe later in this chapter, can often involve an overabundance of enthusiastic remarks that lack real substantive guidance—and positions herself in opposition to those practices. She is a beta who will not perpetuate that pattern. Her position with regard to feedback could ultimately benefit the community, as some of the complaints leveled at fan fiction

are that it is not very “good”—that it fails to keep characters from going OOC, that it is more about the author than the characters (hence Kayla’s as well as so many other fan fiction participants’ distaste for Mary Sue’s), that it is often not about plot or character development but rather merely a vehicle for porn, and that it is often “full of simple grammatical errors, horrible typos, massive holes of logic and ludicrous authorial mistake” (Darlington). Cam’s refusal to “gush” could work toward improving the quality of fanfic not just in terms of the products but also in terms of the collaborations among participants. Yet if the story is actually “good” according to the codes and conventions of both FFN and fan fiction more generally—the character depictions are accurate; the storyline is compelling; the spelling, grammar, and formatting are correct—then Cam’s refusal to “gush” could, in fact, be interpreted as discouraging or even destructive within this supportive community. Her rather harsh tone echoes that of FlightOfFenix and Rae; all three position themselves as seasoned fan fiction participants who have developed specific ideas about what works for them and how they want to interact with others. Cam’s effort to position herself as a beta who is “very honest” and who can be “quite harsh” in part reflects her own desires as an author, as she explained in her interviews, to receive constructive criticism and to produce stories that are correct in terms of both local and global concerns. She resists the common practice, especially within FFN, of offering overzealous remarks or empty praise but does so in an effort to maintain a constructive writing environment. In these ways, she reinforces but also builds upon the ideology that FFN establishes.

In contrast, Kayla positions herself as a very different kind of beta reader when it comes to interacting and collaborating with other authors while still echoing Cam’s insistence on the importance of providing substantive feedback. In her Beta Description, Kayla notes: “As a beta reader, I like to connect with the writer. Become good acquaintances, perhaps even friends. Get to know who they are as a person as well as a writer.” Kayla’s desire to get to know the writers she works with, to perhaps even become friends, underscores that FFN functions as a writing community *and* also as a social network where participants can develop friendships alongside their roles and associated duties and responsibilities. The opportunity to interact with participants even beyond writing, posting, and circulating stories is a major incentive for the study

participants. To put it another way, these friendships are some of the gifts available to participants in these “complex gift economies” (Mazar) I describe in Chapter Two. This desire to form friendships is no small matter; Kayla seems to suggest that friendships have the potential to deepen literacy practices. Gere, too, notes the connection between literacy and personal relationships as illustrated in extracurricular sites of literacy:

The extracurriculum I examine is constructed by desire, by the aspirations and imaginations of its participants. It posits writing as an action undertaken by motivated individuals who frequently see it as having social and economic consequences, including transformations in personal relationships. (80)

Again, there are potential implications for composition pedagogy. Kayla represents an ideology that circulates within both FFN and LJ: that “knowing the author” or even being friends with the author helps one to be a better reviewer—that if the beta can get to know the author and establish a friendship, or at least a rapport, that the feedback will be “good.” This ideology is perhaps not surprising, given that these are, after all, social networks that depend upon participants interacting with one another and, as FFN reminds them, doing so constructively. Contrasting this ideology, say, with that of professional journals reveals the importance not just of providing feedback in fan fiction sites but also of creating and maintaining social relations: professional journals operate on the belief that the “best,” most objective reviews come when the reviewer does *not* know the author. This anonymity or distance allows reviewers to be as critical and constructive as possible. However, there is an important distinction to make between online fan fiction communities and journals: the journals are trying to be objective because their “gift” is publication and their reputation hinges on the quality of the work—and what is being published is scholarship that, in a way, functions as “truth” or “fact.” In FFN, reviewers do not need to be “objective”; participants are explicitly discouraged from remaining anonymous as a way to facilitate a safe (from potentially hostile outsiders) and constructive writing community. Also, a journal review is often “the end of the line,” review, where the feedback is evaluative rather than formative. These comparisons, if nothing else, help reveal the extracurricular ideologies that inform students’ (*and* instructors’) practices in the classroom. They also highlight the differences between feedback that comes during the writing process and feedback that comes at the end. By

drawing upon the experiences of those students who participate in alternative sites of literacy and asking them, for example, to describe the process of providing feedback and to examine the connections (explicit or not) the site makes between quality of feedback and how well participants know one another. While critics and instructors may not see the immediate consequence of fanfic practices for the study participants, the social consequences available in the extracurriculum are particularly compelling reasons to participate. Both FFN and LJ offer opportunities to develop practices alongside personal relationships, seemingly infusing more meaning into their literacy practices.

What is also interesting to consider are the ways in which the literacy practices Kayla has developed in her high school and college composition courses have, in part, informed her approach to providing feedback and her reluctance to become proprietary when working with another writer's work. She explains in her profile:

I don't like to change a whole story. I don't like to go through a story and completely change it. If I think it needs that much work, I'll stop editing and contact you in order for the both of us to see what we can do. That way, you can change it the way you'd like and it won't seem as if I'm taking over. [...] I like to help the writers help themselves, basically.

Her philosophy reflects values many composition instructors try to uphold, including not "taking over" students' essays and engaging them in conversation rather than merely editing their work. For Kayla, beta-ing is much more than editing; it is guiding authors in revising their work. She explains how she developed this sense of ethos:

When it comes to not trying to change a whole story, that just seemed like common sense to me when I started Beta-ing. I know I wouldn't like it if someone tried to do that with a story of mine, so I avoided doing it with someone else's. Plus, if there's a large amount that needs to be changed (and this I'm drawing back from my schooling days), then clearly the author has bigger issues at hand, whether it's grammar, spelling, or characterization.

Kayla's response offers a glimpse into how participants transfer skills and dispositions from one site of literacy (in this case, the classroom) to another site (fan fiction). My question then prompted her to reflect on where she acquired those skills and dispositions, and the exchange serves as an example of the kind of conversations instructors can have with students, prompting them to examine, on a continuum, how they acquired literacy practices and which of those practices travel with them from site to site. I go into more

detail regarding the kinds of assignments and conversations that might emerge out of such moments of reflection later in this chapter and in Chapter Six; for now, I want to emphasize how Kayla positions herself as a beta who does not just want to interact at a superficial level—say, just by merely editing an author’s story. Rather, she is invested not just in creating accurate characters and plot lines but also in creating opportunities for dialogue that might deepen her (and the author’s) learning experience. Contrasting Cam’s and Kayla’s beta bios provides insight into the different attitudes and dispositions student writers have, for example, toward providing feedback, revising, editing, and connecting with writers—attitudes and dispositions they may bring to the classroom and how as instructors we can make these practices in the classroom more effective.

In previous sections, I have examined the connections FFN establishes between participants’ writing practices and beta reading practices, and in their interviews the participants also made some of these connections. For example, all six study participants note in their interviews that they have consulted beta readers at some point during their fan fiction careers, and their level of connection with their betas varied from very friendly to professional. Their reasons for consulting betas varied. As I have already noted, Kit often consults betas when the story is long or when she feels it is missing something. Kayla explains that she looks for beta readers that can help her with “characterization, grammar, and spelling.” Cam seeks suggestions on “where to go with a fic (if I haven’t finished it by the time I send it to the beta)” as well as “suggestions on the structure of the story and the characterizations.” She also notes that spelling and grammar mistakes “of course need to be pointed out, but they’re hardly the most helpful.” Likewise, they share why they chose *not* to consult betas. Rae explains, “I choose not to use beta readers right now because I’m focusing a lot on short, spontaneous, bright flashes of fiction. I feel these need to be saved from the process of over-editing in order to maintain the natural feel.” This moment of reflection and justification is particularly telling about writing ideologies that may interfere with the feedback process. Rae’s understanding of genre, regardless of whether or not that understanding is accurate, is that “short, spontaneous, bright flashes of fiction” need to remain “natural” in order to be effective. To achieve this “natural feel,” she purposefully does not seek feedback from a beta. In her mind, a beta would only interfere with the “natural feel” of these fics. Whether or not consulting a beta

would interfere with the “natural feel” at the same level as Rae editing the pieces herself or if she perceives beta-reading as interfering, to some extent, with authorial intent, is unclear. What seems important is Rae’s assumption that a piece that feels “natural” has not been edited, and this moment illustrates the reasons why participants—or students—might resist seeking feedback, suggesting that it is as important to examine the reasons why students do not seek feedback as it is to examine the moments that they do. In their reasons for why they consulted betas, the study participants articulate their goals for their writing and if and how beta readers could help them achieve those goals. Asking students, as authors, to articulate their goals for each writing piece and to think about when and if they want someone to review their work is another example of the kind of reflective work composition instructors can do with their students in an effort to make peer-to-peer sponsorship more meaningful and in an effort to better understand students’ expectations for feedback—when they feel like they need it and when they feel like they do not, and the kind of feedback they would like (i.e. “where to go with” a particular piece of writing vs. maintaining [or creating] a “natural feel”)—as well as their resistance toward working with others. Instructors can also help students continue to be reflective about their writing ideologies surrounding feedback, encouraging them to consider the assumptions that are involved in their expectations for and dispositions toward feedback throughout this process.

Examining the connections FFN establishes between participants’ writing practices and beta reading practices as well as the connections the participants attempt to make is important; of equal importance are the moments of disconnect. For example, participants’ needs as authors sometimes conflict with how they present themselves as betas. Each participant identifies her knowledge of grammar and spelling as strengths. Their attention to correct grammar and spelling reinforces FFN’s related ideology about correctness; however, it seems to go against participants’ own desires as authors, as articulated in their interviews, that those who serve as betas for them would move beyond commenting on spelling and grammar to address larger issues. I provide an extended analysis of this disconnect later in the chapter when I examine the participants’ reflections on the kind of feedback they want compared to what they actually receive.

Another example of an inconsistency is Cam, who articulates multiple preferences that work to make clear her understanding of the role of Beta Reader. For instance, in her interviews she noted that she often submits work to her own betas that is incomplete. Yet as a beta, she emphasizes that she will beta only “\*complete\*” fics. She admonishes, “I don’t want to beta something you wrote yesterday, which is a start that might or might not get finished, because I strongly dislike unfinished stories.” In her preferences to read only “complete” stories, Cam positions herself as a beta who enters into the writing process at a very particular point—that is, upon completion of a draft. In this way, she (re)defines the role of beta as someone who does not necessarily support authors throughout the writing process but instead who works only with complete products, thereby defining feedback as something that comes at the end of the writing process. As an author, Cam recognizes the value of consulting betas throughout the composing process; however, that recognition does not seem to translate when she goes from author to beta. Rather, she privileges her needs as a beta over the needs of the authors who seek her help, potentially disrupting her own efforts to be supportive. In part, her preference for reading only complete stories has to do with managing her time; as she acknowledges, “I have a busy real life, which means that I might say no to your beta request if I feel there’s already too much on my plate. But feel free to ask, if you meet with my requirements.” While betas are prompted to demonstrate their fan fiction experience and commitment to the community, this moment illustrates the reality of participants’ outside lives shaping how much time they could devote to this extracurricular activity as well as the ways in which they get caught in their own ideological negotiations—all of which can potentially undermine their efforts to connect and collaborate. Later in the chapter, I return to this very real-world issue of time and how it shapes participants’ literacy practices and sometimes prevents them from fulfilling their obligations to one another.

In this section, I have analyzed the ideological negotiations that occur within the beta reader process, examining the ways FFN uses the beta reader template to position betas as peer sponsors of literacy and using the interviews to better understand how beta readers think about the process of providing feedback. The template prompts betas to reflect on their practices, thinking especially about their strengths and weaknesses as writers and peer reviewers and articulating their preferences. In doing so, FFN

communicates that being reflective and explicit are two important characteristics of an effective beta. The pages serve a practical purpose, matching like-minded authors and betas. They also serve to illustrate how beta readers themselves negotiate many circulating ideologies about good writing, good authors, good feedback, and good reviewers in order to position themselves as peer sponsors of literacy. For composition instructors, these sites, and the beta pages in particular, have the potential to provide insight into students' attitudes and approaches related to feedback and the ways in which they attempt to assume authority in sites of literacy.

In the following section, I compare and contrast across participants and sites the goals for feedback, analyzing how the two different sites sponsor feedback. I do so by transitioning from analyzing the beta profile pages and the interviews with participants to analyzing authors and readers in action, interacting around texts and, in the process, engaging in ideological negotiations. I reintroduce LJ, noting how in the process of providing feedback participants reinforce the two fan fiction sites' ideologies while also incorporating their own ideologies informed by their experiences and beliefs in relation to fan fiction. I also continue to illustrate how authors' goals for feedback do not always align with what betas and reviewers ultimately provide, and reveal how LJ fosters more extensive and expansive feedback that can push composition instructors to incorporate bi-directional conversations between readers and writers.

### **Goals for Feedback (Sites' / Readers' / Writers')**

Both FFN and LJ position participants as sponsors by encouraging them to respond to each other's writing and "lend a helping hand" when authors need help with their writing. The processes of providing feedback—privately, through beta sessions, and publicly, through reader reviews—offer evidence of participants interacting, collaborating, and correcting, and along the way interactively positioning one another within the ideologies of FFN, LJ, and *House, M.D.* In this section, I examine these processes. As I discuss in Chapter Four, before participants begin posting and interacting with one another, they must agree to several terms and conditions, which stipulate which literacy practices are acceptable and which ones are not and attempt to regulate the kinds of authors and readers they can and cannot be—all in an effort to create a collaborative

and constructive writing environment. In this section, I explore how participants interpret the sites' codes and conventions, such as "rightfully criticizing" another's work. For the most part, the study participants adhered to these codes and conventions during this one-year study; however, it is significant that the feedback that they post troubles the definition of "constructive." Moments of feedback, then, offer glimpses into participants' understanding and negotiation of the generic conventions underlying fan fiction feedback and the ideologies surrounding what makes good writing, a good writer, good feedback, and a good reviewer. As such they can provide opportunities, for example, for instructors and students to compare the goals and success of peer-to-peer feedback across the curriculum and extracurriculum.

In their interviews, the study participants describe their appreciation toward betas. Cam explains how grateful she is to find a beta she really likes:

She's been great, especially with a 43,000 word fic I wrote not long ago. Beyond correcting grammar and spelling, she kept track of the plot, which was immensely helpful in making sure I tied everything together. She usually responds quickly too, which I appreciate a whole lot.

The participants are enthusiastic about the beta system when they find betas they can connect with—those, for instance, with whom a friendship or collaboration emerges or those who respond to their work in the ways they hope—and when the betas could provide a quick turnaround. As I have noted, the scholarly treatment of beta readers and the beta reading system tends to focus on these kinds of positive features of the beta system. The roles and the process suggest that students take on positions of authority and engage in collaboration and revision in their extracurricular practices—an important acknowledgement for composition instructors to make. However, it is important to note that the system is not perfect. In the course of our conversations, the study participants offered examples of some of the complications and tensions they experienced in the beta system. Examining the ways these roles and processes do not work and the tensions that exist between what participants claim they want from the beta process and what they actually get—and, too, what kind of feedback they themselves give when they are betas compared to the feedback they claim they want as authors—is crucial to understanding how feedback is mediated in this site of literacy.

For example, while Cam explains that she likes LJ since she can get more “concrit” feedback versus the more surface feedback she receives on FFN, my observations of beta profiles suggest a disconnect between what kind of feedback readers want and what kind of feedback they actually receive. Many beta readers note as one of their “strengths” their knowledge of spelling and grammar. Yet many of the study participants, like Cam, claim they do not want comments on their grammar or other “local” issues—they want comments on more “global” issues. The interviews with study participants reveal these moments of ideological tension. For instance, the study participants note that more substantial feedback, both in the context of beta exchanges and public reviews, was most helpful. Rae explains,

Advice about characterization that is faulty or structure that could be improved tends to help me the most. Having someone else point it out allows me to see it and apply it to the rest of my writing as well. Grammar and spelling mistakes help too, but in a more limited way.

Kit echoes this sentiment, positioning herself as an author who is more interested in receiving feedback on global issues, such as content; she claims she wants a beta who will ask questions and provide feedback rather than merely edit: “It’s one thing to correct a fic, it’s another to hear one say what they thought of the content.” This focus seems in direct contrast to FFN’s hierarchy of codes, which emphasize accuracy in spelling and grammar but say nothing with regard to accuracy in content. This example reveals the tensions that exist around the process of providing feedback, and they are relevant to composition instructors in terms of prompting students to talk about their expectations when it comes to “good” feedback.

Indeed, I noted that the beta process, like the process of trying to determine what constitutes constructive feedback, is often complicated and riddled with contradictions and frustrations. For example, Cam complains that “there are very few good betas” and that she had to go through “five or six people” before finding her current beta. Most of her frustration has to do with the amount of time that passes between writing the story and getting feedback before posting it publicly:

I want to be able to post the stories I write within a few weeks preferably (after they’ve finished; I never post unfinished stories). To have a beta with a turnaround time of two months is therefore impossible. Also, the beta needs to know her grammar and spelling very well for her to be any

use to me, as well as the fandom in which I write. It was easier in the *Harry Potter* fandom, than in the smaller fandoms. The more people, the more likely someone wants to beta.

It seems, according to Cam, that online fanfic communities have fallen victim to their own success. In the chaos of larger fandoms like *Harry Potter*, the study participants explained that they feel less connected to the community but that they are able to find more betas due to the sheer volume of users. However, smaller fandoms, while they may afford more intimacy, often cannot support writers because there are not enough users willing or able to take on additional positions. The public comments posted in fan fiction communities and the beta conversations that occur in private no doubt constitute a rich and dynamic corpus worthy of study. These exchanges reveal participants' ideological negotiations concerning what constitutes "good" writing and "good" feedback—negotiations that might inform their practices in other sites of literacy, including the composition classroom. Furthermore, given the study participants' critique of the system, it seems time to more closely analyze the benefits and pitfalls of this lauded system.

Often the beta system is undermined by the challenges of the non-virtual world, such as time restrictions and homework, which are imposed on participants' extracurricular practices. For KouTai, lack of time stymied her work with her beta: "I had a beta at one time and I loved her dearly. She was a fan of mine, actually. We got busy and it eventually died out." Cam and Kayla both address the issue of time in their beta profile pages; Kayla notes: "I do try to get back to the writer as soon as I possibly can. I work [practically full-time but without the benefits], plus I enjoy having a bit of a social life with my friends, family and boyfriend." Because fanfic, for most participants, is an extracurricular practice, they must work around their other roles and obligations. For the study participants, they must squeeze in time on FFN and LJ among their commitments related to classes, family, friends, and jobs. Kayla seems to appreciate the importance of returning feedback in a timely fashion, but also explains that she has other obligations and interests that may prevent her from consistently doing so. Time constraints are something that everyone has to deal with; however, because fanfic is a choice, there might be a false sense that participants will and do make the time for it, which the study participants suggest is not true and which may be an unproductive assumption.

The disconnects in how participants position themselves to receiving feedback have the potential to undermine the beta system and are also worth exploring. While some participants claim that they appreciate the process of exchanging feedback, their public positions on how they respond to feedback vary and sometimes contradict those claims. In Chapter Four, I describe how Rae's attitudes toward feedback are not transparent: While she writes on her profile page that feedback "and communion with fellow writers and fans is my lifeblood, so please comment or email if the fancy strikes," she also notes that her writing would "probably never get much revising." This acknowledgement (re)positions her as an author who is not necessarily interested in feedback or communion—and also as someone who might flout FFN's third Code of Conduct that warns against "hot off the press" material that is "often riddled with errors." Yet this moment, as I argue earlier in this chapter, can also be interpreted as an opportunity for Rae to demonstrate her rhetorical awareness: she lets her readers know that she does not need feedback because she has, in fact, written several drafts ("on the first few goes") and because the conventions of the genre dictate that she (and her readers) focus on the raw emotion of the fic. Thus, Rae appears caught between multiple ideologies: the site's, which suggests that feedback of all varieties at all stages of writing is helpful to an author, and her own conflicted ideology that drives her to declare that feedback and communion are her "lifeblood" but that also compels her to admit that most of her writing will "probably never get much revision." While I can only guess at what Rae is trying to convey in this conversation about feedback, what seems clear is that moments like these provide evidence of participants expressing their own ideology—however complex or seemingly contradictory it might be or however much it reinforces or undermines that of the sponsor's. The sponsor might attempt to impose the value of feedback on participants, but the participants can in turn complicate that particular value according to their own set of values and beliefs. As long as they do not egregiously violate the codes of conduct, participants can negotiate these sometimes-competing ideologies as they need to in order to make their practices more meaningful, according to their individual needs within the larger social network.

My observations of beta feedback combined with my conversations with the study participants reveal that the process of providing feedback is a rich and also ideologically

fraught example of literacy sponsorship. In the next section, I present examples of betas enabling and regulating literacy.

### *Beta Feedback*

As I have established, the study participants have all relied on beta readers at some point in their fan fiction careers. They use them at various stages of the composing process: to help them brainstorm, to help them research, and to help them revise and edit their work before they post it for public consumption, commentary, and circulation. As with the public feedback, the kind of feedback betas offer often depends upon what stage of writing the author is in, and I will continue to discuss these differences throughout this section. I have also noted that three of the participants—KouTai, Kayla, and Cam—are “official” beta readers in FFN, while FlightOfFenix is an unofficial beta. Since KouTai, Kayla, and Cam did not save their interactions with authors, I cannot compare how they position themselves in their beta profiles to how they position themselves in actual interactions around a text before it goes public.<sup>49</sup> However, Kit provided two exchanges she had with her beta readers, which I include and analyze below in order to explore beta readers and authors’ goals and their interaction around feedback.

### Sample #1

Two betas responded to Kit’s fic: one beta’s comments appear in parentheses and bold script, while Kate’s, the other beta, comments appear in parentheses and italics.<sup>50</sup>

“Good morning,” Chase said. The elevator doors closed with their usual ‘ding!’

“Morning.” Wilson greeted with a polite smile.

The atmosphere was cool between the two men as they found themselves in the rare event of being alone in an elevator, belonging to a busy hospital, with only each other as company. Wilson looked over at the younger doctor and noticed a slight disturbance in his expression. Unable to resist the potential need for help, Wilson decided to rise to the challenge. (*Chunky sentence structure. Less exposition and more*

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<sup>49</sup> I can say that when I examined the few public reviews they posted in response to other participants’ stories that I categorized their feedback as “squees” or “global,” and that their global comments centered on character development and pairings.

<sup>50</sup> Kate used Microsoft Word’s Track Changes tool to make her comments, but for the sake of formatting I have incorporated these comments into the text.

*“showing.” The last sentence is way too “this is my goal of the fic and this is what I’m doing and seems forced.)*

“How are you? Things going well in the surgical department?”

Chase was distracted for a moment before he realized Wilson was asking him a question, “Hmm? Oh, oh yeah. Everything's great.”

Not believing the half-truth Wilson asked another question. “How’s Cameron?”

As Chase flinched out of the corner of his eye, Wilson knew he had hit the source of Chase's current mood. “Things . . . could be better.”

“Oh . . .”

“Took separate cars to work, she didn't even stay for breakfast. She doesn’t make an effort to talk about things.” He shook his head, “I don’t know what she wants from me.”

“Do you know what you want from her?”

Chase failed to answer the question from the lack of answers in his mind. “. . . No. It's like . . . nothing’s changed since we've started dating. Well, other than the fact she doesn't want to walk to work together. **(this sounds like they walk from home to work. Do you mean walk in from the parking lot together?)** *(This doesn’t ring true for me.)*

“I was wondering why you were alone in the lobby. I mean, it’s not every day you accompany me on the ride up to my office.”

Chase simply shrugged. “Were you expecting someone else?” *(I like the line but I fee like this part is incomplete. If Chase is “going” to Wilson for something, I don’t feel that Wilson “gave” Chase anything. Wilson needs to say something profound.)*

Wilson immersed himself in the towering pile of unfinished paperwork. Within a couple of hours he forgot about the surrounding world outside his office until a sudden opening of his balcony door brought a sound that startled him and a rush of cold wind into the room. Wilson instantly looked up in annoyance at the sudden intrusion. “Try knocking?” **(Kutner using the balcony door? It’s almost sacrosanct between [House/Wilson]. The only other person that used it was Amber, but she was nervy and also new [didn’t know any better]. I could see the papers falling if the office door was opened wide and fast.)** *(I concur. No one but House and Amber used the door, so it doesn’t make sense for Kutner to. However, I don’t agree with the other person’s comments about Amber. \*gggr\*)*

Kate’s feedback attends to both local and global concerns. For instance, in her first comment, she notes Kit’s “chunky sentence structure,” and also instructs her to do less telling and more showing (a familiar refrain that likely resonates with composition

instructors) and to be more subtle about the purpose of the story. The other beta begins commenting further into the story, pointing out awkward sentence structure. Both betas comment on a potential mis-step in characterization that comes at the end of the fic, agreeing that Kutner would not have used the balcony door but disagreeing on whether or not this action would ring true for Amber. Both betas position themselves as knowledgeable with regard to form (sentence structure) and content (characterization). A beta's ability to work with content was particularly important to Kit, who explains:

I recently found a great beta in one of my friends because she understood my need for a “content checker.” Yes, my grammar and mechanics are my biggest weakness, but to me, the part I care the most about is the content. The content of the story is what people will remember the most so I want to make absolutely sure I got the characterization correct, if I got the background accuracy correct, if the story flows in an understandable order, among other things. My beta and I were actually able to come up with more ideas as our “content beta-ing” inspired many detailed discussions.

Particularly compelling is how Kit separates “content beta-ing” from, say, grammar or style beta-ing. She acknowledges that her grammar and mechanics are the “biggest weakness” of her writing but also acknowledges that accuracy in content is more meaningful to her as an author. There is a complete distinction here between local and global, an interesting point of tension for both fan fiction sites and composition classrooms. For Kit, an unsuccessful beta session is one that centers on her grammar and mechanics—that is, where the beta might not have the skills to work with content or might not prioritize the content. What is also worth noting is that she seems to be looking for a more interactive experience regarding feedback: “My beta and I were actually able to come up with more ideas as our ‘content beta-ing’ inspired many detailed discussions.” However, in this sample beta exchange that she provided me, the feedback is thorough but very much one-directional.

This second exchange occurs between Kit and another beta around a different story. The beta's comments are in bold, and in the interest of space, I include only excerpts from the first half of the story.

*Sample #2:*

House sat in a large, **(delete comma)** operating chair with his head locked into place. All he could do was sit and wait for the inevitable fate he agreed himself **(delete himself)** to. A doctor stood above him staring at the probe sticking out of his brain and at the machine it was connected to. **(have two sentences next to each other ending in “to.” May want to revise.)**

House grunted, “Here we go again.”

“Again?”

“This isn't the first time I was in this position.”

The nameless doctor chuckled, “You sure get around.”

The blond woman observing from the corner spoke up in a special decibel that only House could hear, “Endings really do resemble their beginnings, huh?” She had to chuckle at the irony.

House kept his unreadable gaze forward, refusing to give any type of attention to the woman.

“You know that conscious disregard is a type of attention don't you? The harder you concentrate on pretending I don't exist, the more your mind dwells on me. It's like a double-edged sword.”

The doctor gave House's partial **(Did you mean partial or parietal?)** lobe a final look-over as he readied himself for the procedure at hand. “I just want to remind you that this is going to hurt.”

His concern earned an unseen eye roll from his patient. “I know.”

“Remember that it's not real pain, it's just- **(should be an mdash — instead of a hypen)**”

“Just the brain's response to foreign mind-control. I already heard your explanation over 10 times last night. You'd think that you'd have made the procedure a little less messy since college.”

“I didn't exactly major in abstract neurosurgery you know.”

“Are you going to throw the damn switch already or keep pretending I'm one of your lab rats forced to give a shit?”

**(Possibly add “The” before nameless)** Nameless doctor began the procedure just as the woman in the corner waved goodbye smugly **(move**

**smugly after waved, otherwise I don't know what a smug goodbye is. :).**

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House came home from Mayfield no worse than when he had left. He started on the **(I'd delete the "the" before methadone and Vicodin, but that might be personal taste. Also Vicodin is a name brand and should be capitalized)** methadone again and was clean enough from the vicodin that he was back on his original dosage if he ever needed it. He also (reluctantly) **(no reason for parentheses)** resolved some buried issues and came to some agreeable terms with his misery, as much as he could anyway. **(Don't mean to be so annoyingly nit-picky but I guess I am. This last sentence is a little awkward.)**

As much as he hated to admit it, the whole experience helped him more than he expected. **(Does this sentence belong with the previous paragraph?)**

Throughout this exchange, Kit's beta attends mostly to local issues, focusing on Kit's use of parentheses, sentence structure, and spelling. She spends little time offering "concrit," aside from when she asks about the location of the very last sentence. However, in what composition instructors might call her "end-comments," she broadens her focus to comment on the more global aspects of the fic, if only in terms of offering fairly general praise:

Hi Kit, Here you go. The fic is a wonderful, creative, and emotional story. Hope you don't mind all my little concrits. I've become quite a nit-picking pain in the you-know-what as a beta. However, bottom line, they are only suggestions. Feel free to choose which comments are in line with your vision.

What is interesting is how the beta characterizes her attention to the local issues as "concrit." This speaks to my earlier point that the definition of "concrit," or "constructive criticism," is not always stable, despite the fairly universal definitions available on various fan fiction sites. This confusion or tension is perhaps a result of participants not defining the term for themselves and for those with whom they work. If this beta's attention to sentence-level issues could be interpreted as "concrit," it might explain the moments of disconnect I noted in the data between what kind of feedback authors claim they want and what kind of feedback readers actually provide. Finally, in my follow-up

interviews with Kit, I asked her what kind of response she received from other fans once she had posted these stories, and she admitted that she had not returned to them since having received feedback from her beta—that she simply had not had the time to devote to making the revisions. Here, the shortcomings of the extracurriculum are evident: because she was not writing to fulfill a required assignment, she did not have to follow through with the revisions and submit the stories, as much as she may have wanted to. This is not to say that no learning occurred in this moment, but it does seem disrupted. Going forward, scholarship can focus on how authors do and do not take up the advice of beta readers and reviewers.

While betas are interactively and reflexively positioned in fan fiction communities as official experts who can advise authors, the fact is that anyone can offer feedback within these social networks. Both FFN and LJ provide the tools for ordinary participants, no experience required, to comment on each other's work. In some ways, this system seems to undermine the need for betas; after all, why would a participant wait for weeks for feedback from a beta when he or she could get instant feedback from fellow fans, many of whom are just as, if not more, experienced than many of the registered betas? For some of the study participants, betas provide opportunities to connect and collaborate with another, sometimes more knowledgeable, participant one-on-one; for others, the thought of being publicly ridiculed for mistakes in content or spelling compels them to seek the services of a beta before publishing a story. Yet the participants very much appreciate the public feedback, and in the following section, I describe and analyze the various forms of interaction and show how they, like the beta profiles and sessions, illustrate the ideological negotiations that occur among sites and participants.

### *Public Feedback*

The idea of posting stories for potentially hundreds, even thousands, of fellow fans is compelling for many of the study participants. They enjoy working with beta readers, designing their profile pages, participating in forums and communities, and reading other participants' stories, but posting their own stories and then receiving instant feedback is particularly exciting. They explained in their interviews that the beta interactions are helpful, but that they also value the feedback they receive from participants who are not necessarily experts but rather fellow *House* fans, who given their

shared appreciation and knowledge of the source text, can still offer valuable feedback. In this section, I compare and contrast the different kinds of public feedback offered across the two sites of study as a way to further understand the overlapping and also contradicting expectations among sites, authors, and reviewers.

I began my analysis of the public feedback offered on participants' stories by conducting a semi-random selection of 248 reviews of *House, M.D.* stories posted on FFN and LJ (124 in each site), taken from the reviews of the six study participants' stories as well as those they had "favorited." As I read the reviews, I looked for patterns; for instance, there were certain phrases or commands ("Update!") that were repeated across these comments, suggesting that participants were using a common and accepted discourse for interacting with one another that differs from both the kind of feedback they receive from betas and the kind of feedback they described in their interviews as wanting. I began to distinguish between feedback that seemed to address local issues and feedback that addressed global issues; I also coded for feedback that involved questions to the authors and feedback that was particularly enthusiastic if not particularly substantive. I turned these patterns into categories so that I could get a better sense of purpose and quality of this public feedback and so that I could more easily see participants negotiating definitions of "constructive" feedback, for instance, and what generic conventions inform participants' feedback. The six categories that describe the feedback are illustrated in the two tables below:

**Table 5.1: FFN Feedback**

Squees	Substantive	Local	Questions	Negative	Mixed Response
60	47	3	4	2	8

**Table 5.2: LJ Feedback**

Squees	Substantive	Local	Questions	Negative	Mixed Response
38	36	1	1	0	48

Before defining these categories, I want to note, again, that the kind of feedback an author receives depends in part upon where he or she is in the writing process. For instance, many authors post one chapter or section or even scene at a time rather than

posting the entire story. In this instance, readers offer feedback on what they think is going well so far, what they think needs work, and what they hope to see in the next installment. For stories that are posted and assumed complete, the feedback is similar: reviewers leave comments about what went well and what did not seem to work—and it is assumed that the author would bear in mind these comments for the next *House* fic. In these ways, participants serve as peer sponsors of literacy by way of the reviews they post, alternately enabling, regulating, and sometimes suppressing one another's literacy practices. My aim in creating categories of feedback is to more closely examine the conventions of fan fiction feedback and to understand, through these various conventions, what feedback readers feel is important to provide. I then compare these findings with what kinds of feedback *authors* feel is important for readers to provide, illustrating moments when interaction, collaboration, and constructive criticism become contested concepts.

According to fanlore.org, a “squee” is an “onomatopoetic expression of enthusiasm and joy, and the word can be a noun or a verb.” In fan fiction, this form of feedback serves to encourage writers, and according to my findings, it is the most popular form of response within FFN during the year of study. Squees are mostly offered as expressions of gratitude, praise, and as words of encouragement. The following response to one of Cam's *House* fics is an example of a squee: “that was just great! wonderful! thanks for the good story to read 8D.” Squees typically include exclamation points and smiley face emoticons, such as the one the reader includes at the end of her response, to convey the reader's enthusiasm. They are particularly useful in offering instant gratification to authors—and the study participants did admit in their interviews to reveling in these quick and fervent responses to their work. The brevity of squees means that they do not tend to point out to the author what specifically worked well in a fic. As I discuss later in this section, squees do serve a purpose; however, the first definition of the term listed on UrbanDictionary.com captures many writers' intolerance toward these sometimes overly enthusiastic responses: “1. A noise primarily made by an over-excited fangirl.”

I included as a sub-category of Squees what I called Demands for Updates, which are quite literally demands from the reader to the author to update a story in progress.

Other reviews might also have included these kinds of demands or requests, but the ones I placed in this category involve feedback solely made up of pleas like “Update!” or “Please continue soon or I will die.” This particularly dramatic form of feedback is meant to encourage authors to keep going, particularly in their serial works, and as such serves a similar purpose as squees. As FlightOfFenix’s “rules” indicate, not everyone finds this form of feedback particularly helpful. Initially, my impulse was to dismiss this form of feedback for its lack of substance; it did not seem to contribute much beyond validating the author. Yet the sheer quantity of these demands is telling; they reflect some of the values of the community, which include interacting and providing constructive feedback. While these comments may not be substantive, they do seem constructive in that they serve a particular purpose at a particular point in the composing process: to encourage authors to keep going. These reviews suggest that readers, in part, perceive “constructive” as encouraging and believe in the value of letting authors know that their stories are well received. These are tensions and inconsistencies that may feel familiar to instructors, and they provide valuable insight into the kind of feedback reviewers perceive the author needing at the time and the ways in which “constructive” gets defined.

I determined in my analysis that it was necessary to make a separate category from Squees that encapsulated reviews comprised of squees but that also included other kinds of positive feedback. This category I called Substantive, an imperfect term that nevertheless aims to capture the reviews that were positive, even enthusiastic, but also, as the name suggests, much more substantive than squees in terms of providing direction for the author. Substantive feedback includes what fanfic authors like Cam refer to as “constructive criticism,” or “concrit,” and also what I have been referring to as “global.” According to fanlore.org,

concrit stands for constructive criticism, which is a comment or review in which the reader (or viewer) points out the mistakes or errors in a fanwork with the intent to help the creator of the fanwork improve their skills. Concrit is different from a flame, which is a comment or review meant to hurt the creator’s feelings or sometimes drive them out of the fandom entirely.

Substantive responses are much more specific than squees. For example, readers often quote lines back to authors that they enjoy, comment on the success of the author's rendering of the characters or pairing, make note of the details included, or offer suggestions for the direction of the fic or further reading/watching the author could do. Other reviewers offer advice or affirmation about plot points. Below I offer two samples of global feedback, both in response to the same story posted by FlightOfFenix:

*Sample #1:*

Okay, you are a good writer, and you show a lot of promise. You've got most of the basics of technique down apart from some problems with punctuation, etc. However, there are a few other problems. Tense shifts. Changing POVs in the middle of sections. Any good writing site or beta will help you with these things. The other problems are to do with the content. Namely, medical veracity. Your descriptions fall flat because you clearly don't have the background. I would suggest that you at least give your story some grounding in day to day hospital before you get into the romance. Research a couple of diseases, etc, and gumpf it up a bit.<sup>51</sup>

The reviewer positions herself as a more experienced writer and fan—and more experienced writer of *House* fan fiction—than FlightOfFenix, noting supportively if not perhaps condescendingly that FlightOfFenix is a “good writer” who shows “a lot of promise.” She goes on to offer advice not only on grammar and tense shifts and where to go to seek help on these issues—“Any good writing site or beta will help you with these things”—but also on more global issues like setting the scene. She recommends that FlightOfFenix do some research and “gumpf it up a bit” in order to make the story more accurate. This reviewer thus reinforces the importance of accuracy in storytelling, even when the writer is not necessarily familiar with medical discourse. This emphasis on accuracy in terms of content comes out of fan fiction more generally and not necessarily from FFN. The site emphasizes correctness in format, style, grammar, and spelling, but does not encourage authors, for instance, to conduct research in order to achieve accuracy in characters or storylines; rather, the participants circulate and reinforce these conventions. In Chapter Four, I describe the phenomenon of participants lurking, of indwelling in a community before they attempt to begin engaging in its social and

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<sup>51</sup> I had hoped to use a longer excerpt, but during the member checking process FlightOfFenix asked me to reduce the length in order to make it less easily identifiable.

discursive practices, and it is often in the process of lurking that participants learn the conventions and norms that other participants expect to see reinforced. The presence of betas and the ability to comment on one another's stories—and to do so constructively—promotes a global accuracy, or correctness, that is an essential component of fan fiction ideology more generally.

In their interviews, the study participants reinforce the importance of research. All six report doing research for their stories, consulting websites like the American Medical Association, Google, and Wikipedia to ensure that their stories are accurate and compelling. While some composition instructors might cringe at the thought of students conducting research on sites like Wikipedia, where the information is often not accurate, these sites prove accessible to writers who do not have medical backgrounds and who, often working within certain time restrictions, need to access information quickly.<sup>52</sup> Only Kit admits that she does not do “much research,” but she also acknowledges that she probably should and also that at times she relies on a beta reader to do research for her. It is not clear why she does not conduct research—whether it is a matter of time or a feeling that she is not good at it, or simply a matter of not making it a priority in her writing process. But this moment is interesting for two reasons: first, it reveals that despite Kit's awareness of a particular convention or expectation, she does not necessarily adhere to it. As with Rae, who does not always consult betas or always revise her work, Kit rejects rather than enacts this obligation. Second, it demonstrates the kind of collaboration that occurs between participants as well as the kind of duties that beta readers assume, from editing to revising to researching. As instructors, we can pay attention to the obligations that participants do *not* take up. While the site managers in FFN and LJ do not explicitly instruct or encourage participants to do research, participants know—usually, as the study participants explained to me in their interviews, through lurking—that this is an expectation of fan fiction more generally, especially fan fiction that involves complex medical or legal storylines. As I explain in previous chapters, part of the appeal for *House* fan fiction writers is trying to create believable medical storylines. Thus, when the

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<sup>52</sup> Some participants consulted the communities and forums in which they participated. Throughout the one-year study, more and more sites emerged that were aimed at helping fan fiction writers create accurate settings and storylines for their medical stories; many of these sites advertised that they were run by medical experts in an effort to appeal to those authors who wanted more accurate information than they might have found on sites like Google or Wikipedia.

reviewer suggests to FlightOfFenix that she should conduct research, she is helping her meet the conventions of the fandom.

In the second sample, the reviewer also notes the grammatical issues and, furthermore, calls out FlightOfFenix on her lack of originality:

*Sample #2*

You know, there's something really interesting about how House dealt with Andie in Autopsy. Dang it, I thought you were going to write about that. I mean, that's a fascinating idea. House respecting the rights of a very young patient. The parallels between his injury, and the lack of respect shown him by both Stacy and Cuddy, the respect he showed a child. I mean, I could probably write a thesis. So it was with great anticipation that I delved into this story. What's here? Absolutely NO mention of the subjects brought up in Autopsy. What we have here is the same damn shipper I've read about 700 times now. There are small issues with grammar, nearly made me think that the author's first language isn't English. But nothing really awful. To paraphrase Gertrude Stein, "there's no here here." In the middle of reading it, you say to yourself, "Gosh, I wonder if there's anything new on fan fiction dot net."

Initially, the reviewer offers some back-handed praise, expressing disappointment that FlightOfFenix does not pursue a particular angle:

Dang it, I thought you were going to write about that. I mean, that's a fascinating idea. House respecting the rights of a very young patient. The parallels between his injury, and the lack of respect shown him by both Stacy and Cuddy, the respect he showed the child. I mean, I could probably write a thesis.

But the reviewer's disappointment is too great, and the praise quickly turns to insult:

So it was with great anticipation that I delved into this story. What's here? Absolutely NO mention of the subjects brought up in Autopsy. What we have here is the same damn shipper I've read about 700 times now.

The reviewer imposes here not just an expectation for correct grammar—"There are small issues with grammar, nearly made me think that the author's first language isn't English"—but also an expectation for originality, for something beyond the same "shipper," or story centered on a particular romantic pairing, that so many fan fiction writers post each day. These episodes of feedback are compelling in that they reveal the presence of sponsorship as well as the ideological negotiations made in the process of

reviewing stories: the reviewer, in fulfilling her duties to “rightfully criticize,” reinforces the tenets of FFN’s ideology, emphasizing in the process the need for correctness while also introducing her own ideological values, such as originality, that she feels would enhance the quality of FlightOfFenix’s story.

Other remarks categorized as Substantive warn an author if a character seems on the verge of going OOC. According to the study participants, going OOC is one of the worst transgressions a fan fiction writer can make. Pugh confirms this: “No fanfic reader I know likes or approves of fiction in which the canon characters are made substantially different from their originals, doing things that seem out of character for them (‘character rape,’ as the term is)” (36). One reader warns FlightOfFenix that she is dangerously close to going OOC in one of her stories: “I did a small double-take at House offering to buy the drink. The “my treat” seemed slightly OOC for him—even this new and improved House that thanks Cuddy for doing something good, and gets thanks from patients and their families . . .” Even slash fiction—which to some is the ultimate example of fans taking creative license—is expected to stay true to the character, and participants note if they feel the author violates this important convention. So while the Global responses I coded were mostly positive, they also gave the author something to work with beyond a compliment as the two examples above demonstrate.

The category of Questions is important because it demonstrates participants offering feedback in ways that could promote dialogue or further interaction; in other words, the questions could spark a two-way interaction. The feedback in this category, as the name suggests, is comprised of questions, typically posed to the author but sometimes posed as general musings about the show or about the current season. For example, in response to one of Cam’s fics, a reader ponders: “So I’m guessing House is the dad?” In response to one of Kayla’s fics, a reader includes two questions: “Oh man, did you know that the new version of Firefox spell checks such things as this and that yay isn’t a word? I just learned this . . .,” and “Also—can that actually happen, or did you make it up? Either way, cool case.” In the former, the reader posits a question about a local concern, the spelling of “yay,” in the form of a conversational question. In doing so, the reader minimizes the force of the criticism. In the latter, the reader, rather than calling Kayla out for not being accurate or believable in her description of a particular medical procedure,

instead delivers concerns in the form of a question, almost as if in passing. While some readers demand that a medical scenario depicted in a fic be researched and realistic, this reader seems content even if the “cool case” is actually implausible.

The category of Negative includes comments that do not have much substance (“Boo”) or that seem more critical than constructive. Flames are an example of “negative” feedback. KouTai explained in her interview,

I hate flames. I despise when some one [sic] tells you that your story was crap and does not provide a reason why. What is really annoying is when they bash the story based on a relationship that takes place and you have warned them before hand. That’s not helpful. Just rude.

I observed very few of these comments; perhaps the closest example is the reviewer who calls out FlightOfFenix for being inaccurate and unoriginal. Still, her lengthy comment includes substantive feedback, and while her assessment is harsh she does not attack the author, and thus I categorized it as Substantive rather than Negative. What is perhaps interesting and important is the lack of “negative” responses, for it suggests that the rules imposed by the two sites—and, increasingly, by most online networks—and the norms and conventions associated with fan fiction more generally, practices that attempt to promote constructive feedback, are in fact working well in creating a constructive writing community that suppresses potentially hostile interactions while encouraging rightful criticism.

Finally, Mixed Response is a catch-all category that includes several different comments that might otherwise have been included in the other categories or that include comments not otherwise categorized. The following is an example of a Mixed Response:

AH! More! I'm begging! The day I have *House* withdrawals, you post a short chapter. :P Oh, well. At least you posted, which made me happy. I'm surprised [sic]; House is actually being sensitive! Wonder what Cameron's gonna do now? MORE! :D

This response could be categorized under Squee, Demands for Updates, or Questions, but the references to specific parts of the fic suggest it serves multiple purposes and, given the reference to character development, could even be considered a Substantive response. Therefore, I placed it in a category that would reflect its many components.

Examining the categories of feedback reveals what kinds of feedback readers feel are important to provide within and beyond the constraints of FFN's Codes of Conduct. Through public comments, participants serve as peer-to-peer sponsors, alternately enabling and regulating one another's literacy practices and in the process co-constructing not only a shared sense of what constitutes successful *House, M.D.* fan fiction but also what constitutes constructive feedback—that is, what to “lend a helping hand” to “aspiring authors” looks like. What is interesting about these findings for the field of composition is the fact that both “positive” and “constructive” feedback seem important to this process. As instructors, we often discourage students from seemingly superficial feedback (e.g., “Your essay is really good”), but I wonder if in doing so we neglect to acknowledge the real importance of squees and demands for updates—or the composition classroom's version of these—in the process of writing. Perhaps in our conversations about feedback we can discuss how this kind of positive if not superficial feedback can, alongside more substantive feedback, enable authors in ways we sometimes overlook in our efforts to push student writers to be more critical.

I pursue this conversation regarding feedback, examining the study participants' dispositions toward feedback and the moments of disconnect or contradiction, in an effort to counter some of the overly positive representations in fan fiction scholarship about betas and feedback and, furthermore, to provide potential new avenues of inquiry for fan fiction and composition scholars alike. In the following section, I describe how the two sites of study sponsor particular kinds of feedback, reinforcing along the way the value of studies that offer comparisons across sites in order to reveal the social and material conditions that recruit, enable, regulate, and suppress literacy.

### *The Role of the Site in Encouraging (Particular Kinds of) Feedback*

FFN and LJ are both social networks, and they both serve as forums for fan fiction participants. However, LJ is also a blogging community, and this difference between the two sites is significant in terms of what kinds of feedback and interaction can occur, in turn influencing participants' day-to-day decisions about where to post their work. For example, LJ recruits and enables literacy in large part, according to the study participants, through the affordances of its platform, which allows for quicker and more

layered interaction among participants. In this sense, the superior material conditions—that is, the tools and technology—enhance the social conditions. It is the opportunity to engage in conversations with readers or to develop friendships that compel participants like Kit, Cam, and Kayla to choose LJ over FFN for feedback. Furthermore, the study participants note in their interviews that they often determine where to post a story—FFN or LJ—based on what kind of feedback they want from their audience.

For example, those study participants with both FFN and LJ accounts say in their interviews that they are more likely to receive comments on global rather than local concerns in LJ. In my observations, Mixed Responses were far more frequent in LJ, in part because LJ's blogging platform allows authors and readers to interact publicly, and exchanges often changed course to accommodate conversations that went beyond the actual story. Furthermore, any demands or requests for updates on LJ, versus FFN, were part of lengthier feedback; there were no comments on LJ made up entirely of demands or requests. In FFN, authors are not expected to respond directly to these reviews; if the chapter was part of a longer series, often the author would fix any errors or issues and present them in an updated version of the longer series, and that would serve as a response to the feedback. However, authors and readers can and often do correspond in LJ, and these conversations are public so that others can view the thread. As Kit explains,

FF.net is more like a 'quick fix' in regards to fanfiction. It's more of a place to just read fics one-way. On LJ, just posting a fic or reading a fic doesn't end the experience. LJ allows for comments and shared replies from the author allowing all sorts of discussions and feedback.

Cam described preferring LJ for the same reasons:

LJ [...] is the best place to get concrit, and longer reviews with more details about what worked and what didn't. I'm also free to respond to the reviewer, and in some cases it turns into longer conversations and even discussions. [...] On the other hand, ff.net reaches a whole lot of people, and [if] I simply want positive feedback, that's the place to go. The number of "omg!!! ths so go0d" type comments fics get on ff.net is insane.

LJ is also appealing because of how much more quickly feedback can be posted and read. As Kit explains, leaving reviews on FFN "takes three times as long as it does to leave a comment on LJ," which she feels translates to fewer readers willing to take the time to comment. In addition, she explained that author responses to comments are only visible

to the author and the reader and that “even then, the time there is limited; the answer only appears in an email which runs the risk of deletion,” whereas on LJ “each and every comment is available to the author and various readers alike (even so, the ability to private message authors is available everywhere).” The ability to communicate quickly cannot be emphasized enough, for it facilitates connections between users and inspires them to continue participating.

Returning for a moment to categories I created, I noted that in the reviews I read there were a high number of squees in both sites, which seems to refute Cam’s claim that there are more purely positive comments on FFN. However, what I also noted is that there were more demands for updates (which are themselves limited in terms of providing feedback, and in that way, squee-like) in FFN than in LJ and many more mixed responses in LJ than in FFN. For example, below is an exchange between Kit and her reviewers in LJ:

**Reader #1:** this is wonderful. <3<sup>53</sup> and more realistic, I think. I like that wilson gets that closure and i like that you worked in the canon events around it <3

Thank you \_\_\_\_\_ <3

**Kit:** The HH-WH [House’s Head-Wilson’s Heart] references weren’t even part of the original planning, I just wanted a bit of detox-induced violence yet somehow that worked it [sic] way in there :\ lol Almost scary...<sup>54</sup>

Thanks for reading! :D \*hugs\*

**Reader #2:** I’m glad you wrote this. I still don’t get why House went to Cuddy and not Wilson to detox.

**Kit:** Thank you for reading :)  
Poorly planned Huddy was poorly planned.

**Reader #3:** This was fantastic! You made me cry! \*mems\*<sup>55</sup> I really wish Wilson were actually there for the detox instead of Cuddy. Plus I wish that Wilson and House would actually discuss what you’ve mentioned here!  
Thank you so much for writing this and sharing it! xoxo

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<sup>53</sup> “<3” turns into a heart symbol in some web spaces.

<sup>54</sup> According to Wikipedia, “:\” stands for “skeptical, annoyed, undecided, uneasy, hesitant.”

<sup>55</sup> According to UrbanDictionary.com, “mems” are “good memories or an adjective describing something that brought about good memories.” In this case, the memory is likely related to a particular episode of *House*.

[...]

**Reader #6:** This is so nice. They really need that closure. You're [sic] version is much better than the writers'. Good job!

**Kit:** Thanks for reading :) I dunno about the writers, maybe there's always the off chance that this all plays towards their grand master plan or that they still [have] a hidden trump card under their sleeves. There is also the fact that having to do something for work takes away some of the pleasure that may be found in a fan's unique perspective. Writers have to attempt to cater to all the fans' wishes, a fan only has to respond to their or their friends' own ;)

It is in these Mixed Responses that deeper and more specific conversations seem to occur. Rather than readers leaving comments and authors replying to them through private message, LJ facilitates extended conversations between authors and readers. In this kind of exchange, several things can happen: readers can leave comments—including praise, expressions of gratitude, and musings on the show—and then the author can respond. Kit can offer thanks to her readers, explain her writing process, and speculate on the decisions of the show's writers. Both Kit and Cam take the time to respond to each reader's comments, usually with a form of thanks; Cam usually included “\*hugs\*” as well, further contributing to an affirmative and inclusive—and, in her mind, constructive—writing environment. That some of the study participants find it important to be able to publicly respond to feedback can in turn be useful to the field of composition. As instructors, we should continue thinking about how we sponsor feedback in the classroom and how we can continue finding ways to make peer workshops useful to both author and audience. This finding can also serve as further impetus for creating more opportunities for students to respond to instructors' feedback so that the communication is bi-directional.

I note in my observations that because LJ is a blogging community and because participants tend to embed their fan fiction within their other discourses and practices, they can do more with their fan fiction beyond posting and commenting. For instance, Kit uses her LJ blog to post writing exercises—such as the one I include below, which she borrowed from a friend and fellow fanfic author on LJ—for her followers—something that the FFN profile template does not allow her to do:

1. Pick a character, pairing, or fandom you like.
  2. Turn your music player on and turn it on random/shuffle.
  3. Write a drabble/ ficlet<sup>56</sup> related to each song that plays. You only have the time frame of the song to finish the drabble; you start when the song starts, and stop when it's over. No lingering afterwards!
  4. Do ten of these, then post them.
- I'm doing this to try and get a feel for the characters for some upcoming (big) projects :)
- [There might even be some scene foreshadowing!]
- Yes, these will suck because I have to write them rather quickly. But please read them so you can point out what I'm doing wrong, <^.^ ehehheh...

She then goes on to share her drabbles for each of her ten chosen characters, and readers respond to those with advice on character and plot development. She can post these kinds of instructional exercises both because the LJ template is interactive and flexible and because, as an LJ participant, she has the right to take on a role of authority without having the site sanction it. She also posts pre-writing, which FFN does not allow but which allows her to flesh out her ideas within a community before she starts writing. She prefaces one pre-writing exercise with this comment to her followers: “So what did you guys think? Terrible? Horrible? I should just give up now and find another idea? Or do you guys want to give me the green light? Any answer is fine with me. :)” In this sense, LJ seems to offer more opportunities to publicly interact *throughout* the writing process. Unlike in FFN, in which participants can only post “completed” stories, in LJ participants can post pre-writing, including questions, drabbles, and exercises. To use the language of composition studies, LJ seems more interested and able to publicly support the *process* of writing, rather than merely the product. These distinctions can prompt authors to consider what they need at any given moment—feedback on their brainstorming versus feedback on a final draft; quick responses on a finished piece versus longer feedback that could lead to a sustained two-way (or more) conversation—and then which site to use. As such,

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<sup>56</sup> Also called a “drabble,” which in creative writing is a fiction story that consists of exactly 100 words. Though extremely short, a drabble must be complete—that is, it must include a beginning, middle, and end. The term comes from Monty Python’s 1971 *Big Red Book*, which declared the drabble a word game in which two to four players compete to be the first to write a novel. According to fanlore.org, drabbles emerged within British science fiction fandoms in the 1980s, and the Birmingham University Science Fiction society is credited as being the organization that set the length at 100 words. Drabbles can also be posted in sets of 100s to tell more of a story than can be told in just 100 words.

they can provide insight into the motivations behind student writers choosing one site of literacy over another.

In this section, I have used sponsorship and positioning theory to examine salient roles of beta readers and reviewers and the complex practice of providing private and public feedback. I discuss the ways in which participants, once they assume the roles of authors, betas, readers, and reviewers, then (re)position themselves—in relation to the site as well as in relation to one another—during their interactions around texts and how, in the process, they attempt to negotiate a writing ideology vis-à-vis their feedback. Ultimately, my findings on fan fiction beta readers and the processes of providing and receiving feedback highlight a number of conversations and conflicts that could be potentially compelling to composition scholars. First, the findings reveal student writers engaged in what Rebecca Moore Howard calls “engaged writing,” which she defines as readers and writers thinking critically and actively about rhetorical concepts like audience and purpose. Second, they illustrate fanfic writers seeing their efforts as part of a collective endeavor and understanding “the creation of meaning as a public, social effort” (Osborn 268). Third, they reveal the ways in which fan fiction participants operate as cultural producers—that is, the ways that they contribute meaningfully to the discourse communities of FFN, LJ, fan fiction more generally, and *House, M.D.* as more than mere consumers. In the process, the participants define and redefine what constitutes “good” in terms of authors, betas, composing, revising, and reviewing. Literacy sponsorship and positioning theory make explicit the agents, dispositions, and practices bound up in the process of providing feedback in fan fiction sites. In the next and final section, I detail the contributions this chapter in particular makes to the field of composition.

## **Conclusion**

My research provides examples of students’ composing processes in the digital extracurriculum and lends insight into the ideological negotiations and tensions they experience as they are reflexively and interactively positioned to provide and receive assistance to fellow writers. It offers insight into what the sites value in the process of providing feedback: for instance, beta readers who are reflective about their philosophy on writing and candid and “accurate” in assessing their strengths and weaknesses and

participants who provide constructive yet kind feedback. What is noteworthy is that despite the process of authentication that beta readers in FFN have to go through and despite the prompting of the beta profile page to help them reflect on their practices and to lend these roles some authority, the study participants often prefer to work in LJ because they like the kind of back-and-forth feedback the platform, and perhaps the absence of official betas and hierarchy, affords. While they respect their relationships with betas, they do not always need their “expertise”—sometimes what they need is to converse with like-minded fans. This research also offers insight into how participants’ underscore and sometimes add to the sites’ writing ideologies; for example, attending to correctness in grammar and spelling but privileging generic conventions like accurate medical scenarios and characterization.

There has been little scholarly attention given to either member or beta profile pages, and I argue that they provide real opportunities to examine how student writers attempt to position themselves in sites of literacy. While some instructors may not describe some of these practices and dispositions as necessarily “good”—indeed, they are sometimes uneven and sometimes contradicting—they can nevertheless reveal prior and ongoing understandings (of authorship, of feedback) that inform students’ practices and help reveal how sites and participants position each other to provide certain kinds of feedback. For instance, the betas do more than merely offer squees—they assume a different kind of position within the process of feedback. Reviewers are positioned to help one another, but the sponsors do not provide much guidance in what kind of feedback is valued beyond that it be “constructive.” In both the conversations that occur among participants on the site and in their moments of reflection, there is evidence of participants negotiating concepts such as “good” writing and “good” feedback, and composition instructors would do well to use these as inspiration for involving students in conversations about how those expectations might change from site to site.

These kinds of conversations can be significant in helping students learn to articulate what skills they bring to the composition classroom practices and, for instance, what kind of feedback they hope to provide and also receive in workshops. What feedback would be most helpful students? What forms of feedback enable their practices, and likewise what feedback suppress them? How do they respond to that feedback? What

feedback feels difficult to provide? How can other students—as well as the instructor—serve as sponsors to their literacy practices? In the constant effort to find more effective ways to facilitate collaboration and “concrit” in addition to attention to more local details, perhaps composition instructors can pull from students’ experiences in the extracurriculum and the ways in which they position themselves to ethically and constructively participate. As Hull and Schultz argue, it is important that instructors ask ourselves questions like, “How might out-of-school identities, social practices, and the literacies that they recruit be leveraged in the classroom? How might teachers incorporate students’ out-of-school interests and predilections but also extend the range of the literacies with which youth are conversant?” (593). In Chapter Six, I attempt to answer these questions by suggesting how literacy sponsorship and positioning theory can frame conversations with students about their curricular and extracurricular literacy practices and by offering strategies for incorporation that would reinforce these conversations.

CHAPTER SIX  
TRANSFORMING THEORY INTO PEDAGOGY  
SPONSORSHIP, POSITIONING, AND WRITING IDEOLOGIES  
IN THE COMPOSITION CLASSROOM

And then also, I'm waiting for these ideas [concerning sponsorship] to be overtaken and challenged or improved, or repudiated maybe someday. So, I guess it's a great thrilling opportunity to be part of that process of coming to understand literacy in deeper and better ways.

– Deborah Brandt

**Introduction**

In this dissertation, I examine the fan fiction literacy practices of six college students in two sites, FanFiction.Net and LiveJournal.com, to reveal how these sites work as contemporary sponsors of literacy (Brandt) and to better understand the ways participants are interactively and reflexively positioned within the sites and also how they negotiate circulating writing ideologies—particularly those that emphasize interaction, collaboration, constructive criticism, reflection, and correctness. This research comes out of a long line of scholarship from the past thirty years (from Shirley Brice Heath's *Ways with Words* [1983] to Andrea Lunsford's Stanford Study of Writing [2005-2010]), which highlights students' out-of-school literacy practices and argues for allowing these practices to inform pedagogical practices. Increasingly, this scholarship focuses on sites of literacy that have emerged with the evolution of Web 2.0; yet, as I note in Chapter One, of the existing research, little focuses on the systematic study of college students' everyday literacy practices involving digital technologies. In response to these ongoing scholarly conversations and concerns, this study brings into focus college students' literacy practices in the digital extracurriculum, many of which composition instructors will recognize as consonant with those of the classroom.

For example, one of the significant findings of this dissertation for the field of composition is that the goals, values, and beliefs at the core of fan fiction writing

ideology seem to echo the goals, values, and beliefs at the core of composition classroom ideology. Indeed, composition instructors would recognize the emphasis on interaction, collaboration, constructive criticism, reflection, and correctness that exists within my study sites. Yet there are also fundamental differences that are important to consider. As I show in Chapter Four, a framework of sponsorship and positioning theory reveals how the registration processes and templates recruit, regulate, enable, and suppress literacy practices according to the sites' ideological stance regarding fan fiction and, more broadly, writing. As part of its registration process, for example, FFN includes several sets of rules and codes of conduct members must consent to before they can then move on to designing their profile pages, posting stories, and participating in other literacy practices. These rules and codes of conduct outline for potential participants, to use the language of positioning theory, the "rights, duties, and obligations" associated with their membership in the community and work toward establishing what the site considers to be a constructive writing environment. For instance, participants should avoid posting anonymous critiques of others' work; should both "rightfully criticize" others' work while also taking seriously others' rightful criticism of their work; and should "use textual formatting" to demonstrate their regard for language. By consenting, participants agree to be certain kinds of participants—that is, participants who will interact with others and do so constructively and who will also post stories that are "correct" at what composition instructors call the "local" level.

FFN continues to position participants by way of the static features on the profile page template. These features position participants not just as authors but also as readers and reviewers: for instance, as soon as participants begin posting stories, they are identified on the template as "authors," and at the bottom of the template automatically appears categories that catalogue the author's own stories as well as those stories the author has "favorited." These categories help reinforce the author's responsibility to the community, where it is expected that authors will not only post stories but also "lend a helping hand" to other authors, perhaps by offering feedback on their stories or directing other authors to their work.

Yet alongside the static features is open space that participants can utilize as they see fit. By providing this space and flexibility, the site allows participants the opportunity

to develop their ethos and to reflexively position themselves—not necessarily in order to reject FFN’s ideology but rather to build upon or co-construct it according to their own experiences and desires. In this space, participants can post images that reflect their personalities or signal their fan fiction allegiances, identify their favorite romantic pairings and genres, and establish their own set of rules or even post warnings—as FlightOfFenix and Rae do—in an effort to facilitate constructive interactions and diminish potentially hostile ones. Whether or not they meant to do so, participants’ use of the open space worked to reinforce the ideological tenets of the site; these moments illustrate how the participants in this study co-construct writing ideologies. Simultaneously, the profile pages help participants develop a fan fiction ethos, where they can share their experiences (or lack thereof) writing fan fiction as well as participating in other fannish activities and also share any other knowledge and skills that might be relevant to the community, such as those acquired from their college composition courses. In other words, these pages position participants within ongoing and sometimes overlapping, sometimes competing, story lines—both in terms of Moje’s descriptions of adolescents taking up extracurricular literacy practices “to be part of a story” (““To be part of a story”” 653) and in terms of the story lines, central to positioning theory, within which participants are interactively and reflexively positioned. Specifically, these pages help position participants within the story lines of FFN and LJ, *House, M.D.*, and fan fiction. Indeed, these sites are compelling in part because they do exactly what I am proposing college composition courses should do: they invite participants to share their experiences in other discourse communities—a point I take up in detail later in this chapter.

Another significant finding is the importance of the feedback process as participants negotiate circulating writing ideologies, including those of the site they are participating in and their peers. What constitutes “good” writing and “good” feedback is regularly implied (if not articulated), acted on, and revised by beta readers, reviewers, and authors. The participants in this study work hard to be explicit about their experiences and preferences as both fanfic writers and readers in order to contribute to a constructive feedback process, implying that conflict or misunderstandings work against “good” feedback. Also, many of the participants noted in their interviews that they prefer

LJ when seeking feedback because its inherently interactive nature allows for and encourages dialogue between authors and reviewers, suggesting that for these participants, “good” feedback includes active participation by the author, not just the reviewer. Yet my interviews with participants reveal some contradictions and inconsistencies among participants and practices. When Cam states on her beta profile page that she will only read completed stories but then explains in her interviews that as an author she often seeks feedback on her own stories while she is the process of composing, she reveals contradictory beliefs about “good” feedback. Similarly, participants regularly note that they did not appreciate comments about grammar and mechanics as much as content; however, many of the beta readers address grammar and spelling on their beta profile pages. Regardless of these inconsistencies, the feedback process in both FFN and LJ allows participants to choose (with some criteria imposed by FFN) to position themselves as expert readers and reviewers of other fans’ stories, thereby taking on the role of peer sponsor. In this role, participants can recruit authors according to their strengths and weaknesses, as well as personalities, and the needs of the authors.

Throughout this dissertation, I have been careful to strike a balance between celebrating and also respectfully critiquing fan fiction practices as well as the rules and norms that mediate those practices. I have not wanted to contribute to the discourse that has long disparaged fan fiction; nor have I wanted to idealize these practices or the sites. Rather, my aim has been to determine what the field of composition could gain by acknowledging and analyzing these practices, as exciting and also flawed as they might be. In this final chapter, I articulate the implications of this research, using the Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing designed by the Council of Writing Program Administrators [2005-2010] to make explicit the connections between my research and the composition classroom. In the first section, I describe how my research offers evidence of students developing in the extracurriculum some of the “habits of mind” the WPA describes as essential to success in college writing. In the second section, I describe ways in which literacy sponsorship and positioning theory can function not just as theoretical but also pedagogical frameworks that can bridge the extracurriculum and curriculum and also help students achieve the WPA’s outcomes for first-year

composition: developing rhetorical knowledge, critical thinking, writing processes that involve multiple strategies, knowledge of conventions, and abilities to compose in multiple environments.

### **Fan Fiction within the Context of the WPA Framework**

As I mention, one of the significant findings of this dissertation is that the goals, values, and beliefs at the core of fan fiction writing ideology—interaction, collaboration, constructive criticism, reflection, and correctness—seems to echo the goals, values, and beliefs at the core of composition classroom ideology, at least as it is articulated by the Council of Writing Program Administrators (WPA). In its 2005-2010 Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing (heretofore referred to as Framework), the WPA, to use the language of both positioning theory and literacy sponsorship, positions the composition classroom as a sponsor of literacy, where instructors help students develop “rhetorical and twenty-first-century skills as well as habits of mind and experiences that are critical for college success.” The Framework aims to establish curricular continuity across colleges and universities; in this section, I use it as a way to put my findings in conversation with cutting edge guidelines for the field of composition studies, making connections across the chapters but more importantly bridging the curriculum and extracurriculum by illustrating how students develop these skills and dispositions in spaces beyond the classroom.

The Council defines “habits of mind” as “ways of approaching learning that are both intellectual and practical and that will support students’ success in a variety of fields and disciplines,” and lists in the Framework eight habits of mind essential for success in college writing: curiosity, openness, creativity, engagement, persistence, responsibility, flexibility, and metacognition. In this section, I discuss how my research illustrates the six participants, to varying degrees, demonstrating at least five of these eight habits of mind in their online fan fiction practices.

#### *Creativity*

According to the Framework, *creativity* is “the ability to use novel approaches for generating, investigating, and representing ideas.” As I discuss in Chapter Two, critics

have cast fan fiction authors as “poachers” who work with already-existing texts and characters and whose practices are anything but inventive or creative. However, my observations reveal authors routinely engaging in acts of invention and demonstrating *creativity*. Only if we are short-sighted in our definition of what constitutes originality do we fail to realize the creativity involved in fan fiction. If instead we understand fan fiction participants turning to already-existing texts and characters as demonstrating “the ability to use novel approaches for generating, investigating, and representing ideas,” we can contribute to the efforts to rehabilitate their reputation and, in the classroom, use these practices as examples of innovation as well as acknowledgement. In their Author’s Notes and responses to other participants’ feedback, participants constantly acknowledge the texts and people who shape their ideas (as evidenced by the popular refrain among participants: “I do not own these characters...”); they are acutely aware that their writing processes are highly social and intertextual. The reality is that we do indeed want students to understand the differences between someone else’s ideas and words and their own; many of us spend entire semesters helping students avoid plagiarizing. There is a lot of anxiety bound up in the concept of originality, and I do not mean to diminish the significance of these conversations as they occur online, in the classroom, and in the courtroom. However, rather than seeing fan fiction authors as poachers, we might see them as highly aware and respectful—as illustrated by their commitment to accurately developing their characters—of the texts and authors with which they work.

Indeed, to return to Anis Bawarshi’s important conversations about invention and desire, it is clear from fan fiction participants’ comments to one another about their stories, their attributions to authors and betas, and their research processes that they recognize that invention does not exist in a vacuum—that it is firmly situated in the social. Furthermore, examples of their creativity are not just limited to the stories they post; they engage in a variety of creative literacy acts, from designing their profile pages in order to highlight their skills and experiences and demonstrate their fannish loyalties to generating ideas for other authors as well as constructive criticism in response to others’ stories. In composition’s ongoing attempts to make issues of textual borrowing, citations, and originality interesting and meaningful to students, instructors may want to consider the following list of questions: How might we offer student writers different models for

(re)positioning themselves in relation to the texts they draw from, to the other students with whom they work to produce and revise a paper? What can we learn from the participants' disclaimers, such as "I do not own these characters"? How can we talk to students about the process of invention, of where ideas originate? How can we teach students to use other people's ideas as springboards for their own and to acknowledge that, beyond in-text citations and Works Cited pages? Fan fiction sites offer one out-of-class example for students to consider as instructors facilitate such discussions.

### *Engagement*

Scholars who study the extracurriculum routinely remark how much more compelling sites of literacy in the extracurriculum are compared to the classroom, despite the fact that both the extracurriculum and curriculum are typically rule-bound and require and reward similar skills and dispositions. Fan fiction sites offer examples of participants who have, as the Framework describes it, a "sense of investment and involvement in learning." Both sites encourage and enable a high, if not always consistent, level of engagement, whether it be designing or updating profile pages, posting stories, reading and responding to other participants' stories and participating in discussions about the writing process, and joining community forums. In this study, participants' engagement extends beyond merely writing and posting their own stories to include participating in little-d discourses (reading and commenting on others' stories, posting writing exercises, as well as big-D discourses (designing profile pages, posting photos of their favorite characters, and using the language of the fandom and fanfic.).

Student engagement is central to the scholarship on extracurricular literacy practices. One difference between my research and the research of other fanfic scholars is that I focus on students who, in their interviews, self-identify as successful students in the composition classroom. Often the focus in scholarship is on making the composition classroom a more inviting and productive site for students who are positioned (interactively or reflexively) as struggling—and this is obviously important work that should be ongoing. My focus in this study, though, is students whose writing skills, while not perfect, are strong, and who by nature of their status as digital natives are considered privileged. They have access to the latest tools and technologies and spend much of their

time learning how to traverse across multiple spaces using multiple media. I argue that we must also focus on students of privilege, studying the ways in which the digital is mediating their composing processes, for instance, and the ways in which they do and do not feel engaged in the composition classroom despite their skills and experience. The participants in this study, while not necessarily struggling in their composition classes, are not necessarily *engaged* in them. For instance, Kayla describes her experiences in composition classes in truly negative terms—“Awful. Torturous. Boring.”—despite her instructors’ recognition of her strong composing skills and efforts to create opportunities for her to capitalize on those skills. Her response reflects, in part, her strengths as a creative writer and her struggles to hone her analytic skills; she is much more at ease in fanfic groups because she could play to her strengths as a creative writer. Still, she moved through Advanced Placement courses and reiterated her love of all forms of writing; she is what many instructors would describe as a strong writer. Yet she remained disengaged.

Based on her interview responses, Rae, too, could be described as disengaged, if not disgruntled, with her experiences in composition courses. She criticizes the limitations of her experiences in composition classes, noting that they

never get beyond the clumsy shaping of the metal into a pointy object that is vaguely able to be swung. If you do any work in rhetoric, the point might get sharper and the shape straighter, but the edge is still missing. That edge is what I’m trying to discover for myself through my own writing [in fanfic].

As this elegant metaphor illustrates, Rae does not feel challenged by or supported in her composition classes and turns to the extracurriculum, in part, to remedy this.

KouTai echoes Kayla’s and Rae’s negativity toward the composition classroom, noting that in classrooms “you’re usually forced to write something. I hate it most times. It feels like I am being forced to try and be creative. I despise it. It’s okay if we have to write. I wouldn’t mind it if I were able to pick my own subject. Alas, that is not so.” She describes keeping her writing communities “separate” from one another, and she was reluctant or unable even to recognize the ways they might influence the others. Once again the tension between choice and requirement is evident, though it bears continued scrutiny. For instance, her claim that in the classroom it “feels like I am being forced to try and be creative” might sound odd given that so much of KouTai’s writing and her

identity, particularly beyond the classroom, are rooted in creative writing. Perhaps this tension is not so much about choice but rather about *purpose*—that is, there is for her a much clearer sense of purpose and audience in fan fiction communities. Furthermore, the tools and technologies that support her practices can be hyper-visible in fanfic sites, and were perhaps less so in the composition classroom.

Since I did not follow the participants' beyond their fanfic practices, I must temper any claims I make about their experiences across multiple sites of literacy. However, their negative descriptions of their experiences as relatively successful writers in composition classrooms compared to their experiences in fanfic can be useful in pushing our understanding of why the extracurriculum might be more compelling than the classroom beyond the rather a-critical binary of what practices are choices and what practices are required. This question of what inspires student writers to participate in fan fiction in particular and in the extracurriculum in general and in fanfic specifically is crucial since so many of their discursive practices parallel those discursive practices found in other sites—including the composition classroom. In both sites, student writers are expected to adhere to a writing process that involves reading sample texts that illustrate generic conventions, writing and revising multiple drafts based on feedback from others, and editing. If nothing else, what these findings illustrate is that we must pursue this question of motivation beyond merely dismissing it as a matter of choice.

The answer may be in the different ways these sites mediate that writing process, such as the ways they insist that participants design profile pages and position themselves in the communities. It may also be in the roles, rights, and duties available to them—the sense of responsibility with which the sites infuse literacy practices. It may be the connections participants make with like-minded individuals—something that is perhaps harder to mimic in the classroom. Or, it might be the inherently interactive genre of sites like LiveJournal.com. Ultimately, Rae's, Kayla's, and KouTai's responses to my questions about transference of skills indicate that there is room to pursue these kinds of questions with students. They can lead to critical conversations about what constitutes “good” writing, “good” authorship, “good” feedback, “good” resources and why some sites are more appealing than others. These kinds of questions can help instructors create progressive pedagogies that can keep strong writers like the participants in this study

engaged in composition courses. They can also help bridge the gap between the curriculum and extracurriculum by helping students move with more awareness across sites of literacy, online and offline, and by helping students and instructors alike understand how students' practices in the extracurriculum might influence their practices within the curriculum—in short, by helping students develop a critical literacy that serves them in multiple sites.

### *Persistence*

The Council describes *persistence* as “the ability to sustain interest in and attention to short- and long-term projects.” The six study participants, though engaged in their fan fiction practices, acknowledged that the demands of their academic lives often compromised their ability to be persistent in their engagement—to “sustain interest in and attention to short- and long-term projects.” While they may want to devote more time to their fan fiction, the demands (and consequences) of the curriculum often prevent participants from developing, at least in the extracurriculum, this particular habit of mind. I was impressed by how many of the study participants were writing not only short-term projects, like the drabbles that they posted without first running by a beta and with little intention of revising, but also long-term projects like the book-length fics that involved multiple chapters, which they did indeed submit to betas or post for readers to respond to with the intention of revising. Yet the real-world demands of the curriculum often take precedence and prevent persistence, at least when it came to actually posting stories and leaving feedback on others' stories. While several of the study participants, like Cam, FlightOfFenix, and KouTai, have been somehow involved in fan fiction for many years, thereby demonstrating a persistence in terms of their participation in the community and its practices, they have not always been able to participate in terms of generating stories to the degree they would have liked. Time to work on their fan fiction often comes during holiday breaks and summers, but even then there are challenges, such as fighting for time on the family computer. During the school year, the participants often post apologies for their lapses in postings, promising to return to their fan fiction once classes end. In fact, the ability *not* to persist—to come and go according to their schedules and motivation—likely makes these sites appealing. Also, participants may abandon one site for a period

of time while persisting in another, depending on their moment-to-moment needs and interests. For example, Kayla posts her stories to FFN when she wants the instant gratification of fans responding, typically with squees and other less substantial feedback. Cam, on the other hand, posts in LJ when she wants constructive criticism and the opportunity to converse with her readers. These differences mean that each participant persists in one site but not the other.

Persistence is not solely an issue related to writing but also pertains to feedback as participants who were beta readers note occasionally not being able to provide timely feedback, which in turn could slow down for everyone the processes of posting, circulating, and responding to texts. So too did participants' waning interest in *House, M.D.* affect their engagement and persistence. Ultimately, I argue that persistence is a difficult habit of mind to hone in both the curriculum and extracurriculum. What these findings suggest, though, is that it is important to create a space in our pedagogy to talk to students about what social and material conditions enable and also suppress the ability to persist in sites of literacy.

### *Responsibility*

The engagement that I describe above seems motivated, in part, by a sense of responsibility. The Framework defines this as “the ability to take ownership of one’s actions and understand the consequences of those actions for oneself and others,” and there is evidence of participants assuming this kind of responsibility across their fan fiction literacy practices, starting the moment they agree to the terms and conditions stipulated in the registration process. That participants take up roles, such as reviewer and beta reader, and the associated rights, duties, and obligations, illustrates their sense of responsibility to the community and, more broadly, to the practice of fan fiction; after all, helping other participants negotiate generic conventions and correcting their spelling and grammar mistakes could work toward elevating fan fiction in the eyes of critics as well as help in the recruitment of new participants. That may in part explain why their literacy practices in the extracurriculum are so compelling—there is a sense that they matter beyond themselves and their own personal development. I did note that at times this sense of responsibility falters; the participants complain, for instance, about the slow

turn-around from beta readers, often due to the interference of their offline responsibilities. But I argue we can learn from the sense of responsibility that infuses fan fiction participants' practices: for instance, by exploring the potentially complex relationship between responsibility and originality or between the level of responsibility and the level of engagement. These conversations can reframe for composition instructors the ongoing challenge of getting peer groups to feel a sense of responsibility to other group members.

### *Metacognition*

Finally, through their profile pages, beta pages, and homepages, the participants in this study indicate their capacity for *meta-cognition*, or as I have called it, *reflection*—“the ability to reflect on one’s own thinking as well as on the individual and cultural processes used to structure knowledge.” FFN in particular requires participants to take time to position themselves, vis-à-vis the profile pages and beta pages, within the discourses and ideologies of the site; this reflection can be understood as a duty that comes with participating in the sites. Beyond the required information, participants add whatever information they deem appropriate, such as their preferences regarding genres like slash or Mary Sue’s as well as the skills and experience (including their status as college students) and expectations they bring to the community. Here they can explain their reasons for why they are in the site and can, for instance, position themselves as experts or as novices. The profile pages provide participants, literally, the space to contribute their own values and beliefs and to have agency in developing their own ethos as fan fiction participants. The pages also help prompt participants to anticipate the needs of their audience; conventions that authors take it upon themselves to promote, like posting preferences for romantic pairings on the profile page as well as in the Author’s Note, can preclude hostile interactions that come from readers being surprised by an author’s creative interpretation of a text and can, in turn, facilitate the kind of constructive interaction that FFN and LJ encourages. Indeed, these pages emphasize the value of reflection for its own sake as well as reflection for the sake of more constructive interactions with other participants.

Positioning theory reveals these pages as “autobiographical aspects” of an ongoing “story line” in which it “becomes possible to find out how each conversant conceives of themselves and of the other participants by seeing what position they take up and in what story, and how they are then positioned” (Harré and Davies 38). Because positioning theory operates on the notion that positions are situational and subject to change (Davies and Harré), it is particularly useful to study not only how participants initially introduce themselves to a discourse community but also how they return to this site of entry and modify it as they invest time and begin developing their skills. Requiring participants to create pages reinforces an ideology in both sites that emphasizes reflection and interaction: participants are expected to take into consideration the rules and expectations of the discourse community as they determine what information to include, beyond that which is required from the sites, as they design their pages. Furthermore, it reveals how essential these pages, overlooked in literacy scholarship, are to helping participants situate themselves and to promoting good writing practices such as reflection and interaction. I continue my discussion of metacognition and the potential pedagogical benefits of profile pages in the following section.

In this section, I have summarized my research findings by describing how I observe KouTai, Kayla, Rae, Kit, Kayla, and FlightOfFenix developing, to varying degrees, five of the eight habits of mind the WPA claims are crucial for success in college writing.<sup>57</sup> While we hope that students are indeed developing these habits of mind

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<sup>57</sup> Less evident to me was how these students were demonstrating curiosity, openness, and flexibility, though certainly I got glimpses of these during the one-year study. For example, according to the Framework, *curiosity* is defined as “the desire to know more about the world,” and *openness* is “the willingness to consider new ways of being and thinking in the world.” In their interviews with me, participants noted that their motivations for writing fan fiction often came out of a sense of *curiosity*—that is, a desire to see what they could do with the characters and plotlines of *House, M.D.* Likewise, curiosity often motivated them to join fan fiction sites to see what other fans were doing with the characters and plotlines and to see what kinds of connections they could make not only with the text but also with other fans. That they joined FFN and LJ, fan fiction communities that also functioned as learning communities—versus, for instance, those fan fiction communities such as the Republic of Pemberley that discourage participants from offering any kind of public instruction or critique—where they could collaborate with other authors, seek advice from beta readers, and exchange feedback, could indicate a level of *openness* and willingness “to consider new ways of being and thinking in the world.” Finally, *flexibility* is defined as “the ability to adapt to situations, expectations, or demands,” which I saw some evidence of in their interviews, not necessarily in their practices, when they discussed how their practices shifted according to site and genre. This kind of flexibility is indeed important; it also seems to demonstrate the participants’ degree of rhetorical knowledge. As such, I include it later in my discussion of how instructors can refer to students’ various sites of literacy as they help them enhance their rhetorical knowledge.

*within* the classroom, it is important that we acknowledge, as my research illustrates, that many of them are also putting them into practice *beyond* the classroom. As Parrish reminds us, “the writing instruction we do is only one universe; it exists in a much larger network of alternate writing universes” (163). No doubt there are ideological overlaps as well as contradictions across students’ sites of literacy, and this is where we can do the work of bridging the curriculum and extracurriculum—for example, by examining for ourselves these extracurricular sites of literacy and also by inviting students to talk about their sites, by comparing the social and material conditions across sites that recruit, enable, regulate, and suppress literacy.

Furthermore, I also observe the six study participants engaging in practices that could also help them fulfill many of the WPA Outcomes for First-Year Composition, including developing *rhetorical knowledge* and *critical thinking*, engaging in *writing processes*, and demonstrating *knowledge of conventions*. In the following section, I discuss my observations of how the study participants were working in the extracurriculum in ways that fulfilled these outcomes. I also continue my argument that instructors need to bridge the curriculum and extracurriculum and provide assignments that prompt and sustain this effort to transform theory into pedagogy.

### **Creating Assignments that Bridge the Curriculum and Extracurriculum and**

While as instructors we must be careful about hijacking students’ extracurricular practices such that we render them meaningless—an important tension that I will discuss throughout the remainder of this chapter—it is possible for instructors to use them to inspire discussions and assignments that work both toward developing the habits of mind articulated by the WPA and fulfilling many of the outcomes. In the sections that follow, I provide strategies for incorporation.

#### *Profile Pages*

The pages and blog pages help fan fiction participants position themselves in FFN and LJ and help them develop rhetorical knowledge. As my research reveals, the study participants engage in ongoing conversations, on their profile pages, through their

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conversations with one another, and in their interviews with me, about the importance of not letting their *House* characters go out of character. This effort not to go OOC illustrates rhetorical knowledge as well as critical thinking; they spend time analyzing *House, M.D.* and its characters and often conduct research so that they can create authentic medical scenarios, thereby demonstrating “the ability to make thoughtful decisions based on that analysis” (“Outcomes”).

As instructors, we might ask students to create for themselves a kind of profile page—either in paper or electronic format—in which they respond to required prompts that help articulate the core values and beliefs of the composition classroom, thereby making those ideologies more explicit for ourselves and for our students. There would also be open space on the page for students to articulate their own experiences, skills, and beliefs. Having students create their own pages in which they introduce themselves and reflect on their practices and then throughout the semester update the page to reflect their evolving knowledge, skills, preferences, weaknesses, and strengths could help them learn to position themselves within communities and also help them be more reflective. This reflection, as FFN communicates to participants, is a crucial step in the composing process that interactively and reflexively positions participants within a site of literacy, helps them begin to understand the various agents (site owners, advertisers, fellow fans) and associated expectations, and helps them take stock of and articulate the skills and experiences they bring to the community. Additionally, mimicking the profile page—an increasingly required feature of social websites—can demonstrate to students our awareness of alternative sites of literacy and validate students’ digital literacy experiences. Including the creation (and constant re-creation) of profile pages as a step in the writing could thus reinforce the significance of reflection and also enhance students’ rhetorical knowledge by helping them comprehend the rhetorical situation, including the agents involved, the purpose, and audience, and how they are being interactively positioned and how they might, in turn, reflexively position themselves.

Indeed, these pages can serve to help students “understand the relationships among language, knowledge, and power” (“Outcomes”) in their various sites of literacy. One way that literacy sponsorship can be utilized in the classroom is to frame conversations about the power dynamics that exist within sites of literacy. For example,

as instructors we can create assignments that help make clear to students that writing ideologies are always present (if not always clearly visible) in sites of literacy and help them identify the agents (website owners, advertisers, individual participants who may assume leadership roles) who (co)construct those ideologies and who have the power (or not) to reinforce, reject, or reshape them. The following questions, inspired by literacy sponsorship as well as positioning theory, could serve as the basis for two assignments: 1) a literacy narrative, in which they reflect on the “institutions, materials, people, and motivation” involved in their own acquisition of literacies and 2) an investigative assignment, in which students are asked to indwell in a site of literacy and investigate the sponsors, participants, and practices:

- Who are the sponsors—institutional, commercial, or otherwise?
- How does the site recruit, enable, regulate, or suppress literacy?
- What is the purpose of the site?
- What are the rules for participation?
- What steps are involved in the process of registering?
- What roles are available to participants who enter the site?
- What are the rights, duties, and responsibilities associated with these roles?
- How can participants position themselves within these roles, or can they?
- Can you identify the writing ideologies at work in the site?
- Do you see evidence of participants reinforcing, resisting, or reshaping those ideologies?
- What skills and knowledge might you contribute to this site?
- How is “good” writing defined in this site?
- What are the expectations for interaction? How would you describe that interaction?
- What, if any, are the resources available within the site to help participants with their literacy practices?
- What genres can you identify within this site?
- What texts are circulating in this site?
- What are some of the challenges you might encounter in this site?

These questions can help students approach sites of literacy with more critical awareness regarding the social relations and power dynamics. For instance, to return to Bawarshi and other genre theorists, these questions can get at the inherently social nature of literacy by helping to expose the agents present within and the agendas that might influence participants' practices, and help students think about how to manage their way through the "relations, commitments, practices, and subjectivities" within (Bawarshi *Genre* 76). These questions can also expose genres at work in any given site within which participants must work—or, likewise, they might reveal opportunities to break from these constraints. These discussions necessarily lead to more conversations, which explore issues of access, power, and equity within sites of literacy and, furthermore, reveal to students and instructors why one site of literacy might be more appealing than another based on those critical assessments. We can press students to articulate their ideologies and how they might adapt them to different writing situations.

The question about what "texts" exist in the site aims to help students think about how they engage with already existing texts and, in particular, how to position themselves in relation to other people and other texts. My year in fan fiction communities reveals how authors constantly position themselves in relation to their source texts so that they simultaneously acknowledge that the characters and plot texts are not theirs, while still positioning themselves as legitimate authors with "original" ideas and interpretations. Providing examples of how participants work within sites of literacy, whether it be an academic journal, a blog, or a literature paper, and how they acknowledge (or do not) the other texts and people present within that site can lead to important conversations about originality, intertextuality, collaboration, acknowledgement, and invention. We can help students understand how they are always being interactively positioned by the various agents present in the site and how they can (or sometimes cannot) reflectively position themselves and can (or sometimes cannot) reshape or even reject those ideologies. In doing so, we can help them approach and participate in sites of literacy more critically.

Finally, conversations about language, knowledge, and power can also reveal to instructors and students alike the ways in which alternative discourses and sites of literacy, like those devoted to fan fiction, are diminished because they exist within the

realm of popular culture. R. Mark Hall notes that, too often, composition instructors “miss the chance to draw upon the broad range of rhetorical skills and literacy experiences students bring with them as a result of their familiarity with television” and other forms of popular culture (665). Cultural studies pedagogy, with its emphasis on empowering otherwise disenfranchised voices, incorporates pop culture and multicultural texts into composition classrooms and encourages discussions of multiple literacies, competing or overlapping ideologies across divergent communities and texts, and implications of power within sites of literacy. Literacy sponsorship and positioning theory provide additional methods for facilitating these conversations and for bringing into focus, for both students and instructors, the ways in which popular culture operates as a sponsor of literacy. John Trimbur argues that “popular literacy”

cannot be understood simply as a categorical one of occupying the underesteemed and disparaged term in a familiar cultural hierarchy. Instead [...] the question is better put if we ask how people [...] use reading and writing to negotiate the boundaries between official and unofficial literacies, the sanctioned and the disreputable. (4)

As Parrish argues, “it is important that we turn to non-academic settings to see how amateur writers take on the work of reading and writing by choice, how they develop their own ways of reading and meaning-making, how they use a genre (like fan fiction) to take on a project of reading and writing improvement, and how they help one another do this” (151). That these fan fiction sites promote interaction, collaboration, constructive criticism, reflection, and correctness—values that likely resonate with composition instructors—is precisely why we should not ignore them.

### *Peer Workshopping*

One of the ways this dissertation contributes to the field of composition is to provide evidence of literacy instruction as it occurs in the extracurriculum—and especially how it occurs within peer-to-peer communities—and the conversations that it can generate about what writers and readers expect from the peer workshops. Online and offline, the practice of offering feedback is no small matter. The WPA has long emphasized the importance of students providing feedback to one another, stating in its outcomes that students should “understand the collaborative and social aspects of writing

processes” and “learn to critique their own and others’ works,” and that faculty should help students to learn to “review work-in-progress in collaborative peer groups for purposes other than editing.” Yet for so many instructors, peer conferencing and workshops fall short of providing the kind of constructive criticism we hope for. Nancy Sommers (“Revisions”) noted thirty years ago that composition instructors needed to spend more time discussing with students the process of peer workshopping, and while I believe as a field we have come a long way since then, I think that we need to keep pushing to make these moments in the classroom as productive as possible. When I set out to study fan fiction sites, I hoped to learn strategies for peer conferencing, given that student writers were so willingly engaging in this practice in that context even though they so often criticize it within the context of the classroom. I was excited to see fan fiction participants engaging in various versions of peer conferencing, and to learn, for example, that the study participants appreciate LJ because it allows authors to respond to their readers’ comments and thus supports more sustained interaction as well as more constructive criticism than FFN. I was delighted to see Kit’s beta taking seriously her work, attending to both local and global issues.

Yet I was surprised to discover the frustrations articulated by instructors and students within the composition classroom echoed by several of the study participants, centered on the disconnect between what kind of feedback authors claimed they wanted (i.e. “concrit”) and what kind of feedback readers typically provided (i.e. squees or demands for updates). I have been careful not to entirely dismiss squees, as they seem to serve an important purpose: encouraging the author. Yet the frustrations, inconsistencies, and contradictions evident in the feedback and in the conversations about feedback are important to note. For example, many of the participants complain about the beta system, noting that it is difficult to find “good” betas with whom they could connect and who can turn around work in a timely fashion. The participants often prefer LJ as it seems to support concrit more so than FFN, in part because authors and readers can actually conduct public conversations about a story. In other words, there can be a two-way conversation that fosters more elaborate critique.

Research on literacy practices in the extracurriculum can shape how we talk to students about processes like providing feedback. For instance, we can make sure we

design activities that serve to scaffold peer workshops. In addition to designing profile pages, students could design beta reader pages—or something similar—in which they describe their generic preferences, for instance, as well as their strengths and weaknesses as writers as well as readers/reviewers. Instructors can use these pages to reinforce the importance of reflection and its relationship to constructive interaction, and to pair writers and reviewers. In addition to these pages, instructors can spend time talking with students about their expectations for peer conferencing: What do students hope to get from peer-to-peer workshopping? Why is it that some students willingly engage in it in other sites of literacy but resist when it occurs in the classroom? What can composition instructors learn from studying other sites of instruction? For example, perhaps part of the peer workshopping process in the classroom can involve students reviewing a sample student response to student work and then creating their own categories of feedback—in the ways I did in Chapter Five to examine fan fiction feedback—that would help them determine what kinds of feedback they felt were appropriate given the assignment and what stage of writing they were in. This assignment can encourage students to reflect on their needs as writers and could contribute to conversations that help students and instructors define “good” writing and “good” feedback. They may also help us determine new ways to talk to students about processes like interacting, collaborating, and revising and to continue enhancing their rhetorical knowledge, critical thinking skills, and metacognition.

### *Tracking Writing Processes*

My research also reinforces the value of asking students to describe and compare their writing processes across diverse sites of literacy. For example, Kit, Cam, and Kayla all lurked in particular fandoms so they could learn the conventions and norms before they began posting stories. KouTai and Kayla participate in role-playing games (RPG) to help them through writer’s block or to enhance their understanding of a particular character. KouTai also spends time re-watching episodes of *House* to help her with character depiction. All six participants claim that they sometimes conduct research for their fics, consulting everything from the American Medical Association website to on-site community forums to Wikipedia, again usually to enhance the plausibility of their

medical storylines. And as I note in Chapter Five, all six participants have consulted betas at some point during their fanfic careers. Betas and reviewers help authors negotiate the norms and conventions of the site as well as of fan fiction more broadly—for instance, helping authors achieve correctness both in terms of their content and style. Working together, participants help to increase one another’s awareness of the sponsors shaping their practices and to develop knowledge of conventions, instructing one another on the “formal and informal guidelines that define what is considered to be correct and appropriate, or incorrect and inappropriate, in a piece of writing” (“Outcomes”).

As instructors, we can prompt students to keep track of their traversals across various sites of literacy and to note how their skills do and do not transfer from one site to another—that is, what skills are important in all sites and what skills seem particular to one site. In the interviews, I asked the study participants if they saw the writing they did in one site of literacy (for example, FFN) informing the writing they did in another site (for example, the classroom). Rae’s first response is straightforward:

Absolutely. Good writing takes practice. It’s like a muscle that needs to be flexed and used in different ways to become its strongest. Many of the techniques I learn or discover in one area transfer well to any other area of writing I indulge in.

Later she elaborates on the differences she understands that exist among the various fandoms in which she participates:

As far as the actual mechanics of the writing, each fandom has its own set of “clichés” and accepted plot points or ways of interacting that you must deal with—either by including them or purposefully flaunting them. They even tend to have their own vocabularies that fans expect to see included.

Rae’s explanation demonstrates that she is an acutely aware participant in these sites of literacy; she understands the generic conventions and also understands that “purposefully flaunting them” can be acceptable. KouTai’s responses are more complicated. She initially responds, “Nope. My different writing spaces are usually kept secret from one another.” Her response is interesting for a variety of reasons. First, it is not unusual for fan fiction participants to be secretive about their practices (Pugh; Kustritz), in part because they are still viewed as marginal or even deviant—something to be done under a pseudonym and under the radar. Second, I find it interesting that someone as reflective as

KouTai, who mentions on her FFN profile that she is a college student and an English major who loves to read and write on- and offline, does not in this moment take the opportunity to draw connections among her literacy practices. I decided to follow up with her, asking a question perhaps more leading than I had intended: Can you tell me a bit more about your answer? I'm wondering if, for instance, the skills you acquire/develop in one space transfer to another. And why you keep writing spaces "secret from one another?" Her second response somewhat clarifies the first, as she describes the differences among her original creative writing, her fan fiction, and her academic writing:

Sometimes. It really depends on the skills and the context of the writing. When writing something original, you need to have OC characters, but when you are used to keep [sic] characters away from OC it can be hard. I try to separate my writing into at least three different boxes. There is one for original writings, a box for my fandom related writings, and then there is that nasty little box for papers and essays.

This second response, along with Rae's, illustrates the potential conversations instructors can have with students about their writing across different sites of literacy: How do the expectations for one site differ from the expectations of another? How do you switch from writing for one site to writing for another, where the social and discursive conventions might differ? Are there certain generic conventions you always follow, and do you ever find yourself "purposefully flaunting" conventions? Helping students track their practices across multiple sites and to be metacognitive, or reflective, about their practices can enhance their knowledge of genre conventions "ranging from structure and paragraphing to tone and mechanics" ("Outcomes").

In this section, I describe just a few ways to create bridges between extracurricular sites of literacy and the composition classroom. Sites like fan fiction can indeed serve as fruitful models for classroom activities. In the next and final section of this chapter, I outline some of the challenges and opportunities facing research in the digital extracurriculum and reiterate, one last time, the significance of this kind of research and the need for innovative pedagogies that honor as well as utilize students' everyday literacy practices.

## Going Forward

I have been careful not to position FFN and LJ as perfect sites of literacy; the ideological contradictions, the moments when participants do not provide the substantive feedback authors claim they want, the beta system that seems to fail in various ways, and the emphasis on “local” issues are just a few of the shortcomings. Yet these limitations should provide fodder for conversations with students: what is not working in sites of literacy? What potentially productive literacy practices get suppressed? How? By whom? And yet even as I promote bringing into the classroom students’ experiences in the extracurriculum, I realize that we must do so in ways that do not render students’ everyday practices less meaningful. Of composition instructors, Gere writes:

As we consider our own roles of social agency we can insist more firmly on the democracy of writing and the need to enact pedagogies that permit connections and communication with the communities outside classroom walls. This does not mean appropriating the extracurriculum but merely assigning a more prominent status in our discourses. (86)

Current research suggests that co-opting students’ extracurricular practices can lead to resentment and resistance (see Alvermann; Moje et al.; Black). Instructors must be mindful of how and why they invite students’ experiences into the classroom. We should care about our students’ everyday literacy practices, but to demonstrate care does not mean we require, for example, that our students take up fan fiction. It does mean that we acknowledge the reading and writing that they do outside of the classroom and that we acknowledge the communities that may influence their attitudes and dispositions about the practices we require of them in the classroom. To do so is to create, as Moje argues, pedagogy that is “culturally responsive” (“Developing”). Such pedagogy, she explains, draws on the various discourses (Gee, “Social Linguistics”) present in students’ lives—the discourse of home, community, popular culture, school culture, and so forth—and “recognizes that the needs and interests are always mediated by memberships in many different groups of people and by activities engaged in many different times, spaces, and relationships” (Gee, “Social Linguistics” 5).

A pedagogy that incorporates students’ out-of-class literacy practices recognizes that many students engage in important ideological work outside the classroom—work that could be tapped into because it might influence their understanding of what

instructors ask them to do inside the classroom and because it could help bridge students' in-class and out-of-class literacy practices in meaningful ways that in turn help prepare them to be more critical participants in sites of literacy. As instructors, we too act as sponsors of literacy, who create ideologies by recruiting, enabling, regulating, and suppressing literacy and by alternately empowering and disempowering students. We would do well to more clearly see ourselves as sponsors and to think critically about what standard or dominant ideologies we reinforce, what practices we suppress, what knowledge and skills we accept or ignore. It is also important that we are aware of the multiple economies—money, gift, or otherwise—within which student writers work, sometimes unknowingly, and the competition for their literacy. Brandt notes,

The competition to harness literacy, to manage, measure, teach, and exploit it, has intensified throughout the century. It is vital to pay attention to this development because it largely sets the terms for individuals' encounters with literacy. This competition shapes the incentives and barriers (including uneven distributions of opportunity) that greet literacy learners in any particular time and place. ("Sponsors" 5)

This competition to "harness literacy, to manage, measure, teach, and exploit it" is profoundly evident in the emerging sites of Web 2.0. As students increase the time they spend on the Internet, composition instructors must create pedagogies that reflect these experiences and prepare students for these encounters with literacy in the midst of what Lunsford recently described in an interview with the online magazine *Wired* as a "literacy revolution the likes of which we haven't seen since Greek civilization (Thompson, "Clive"). The extracurriculum can yield important information about how student writers enter into sites of literacy and (re)position themselves to engage in rich and critical, if not sometimes uneven and contradicting, literacy practices. This information can help instructors understand the knowledge, experiences, and beliefs that student writers bring to bear on their practices within the curriculum. Online communities, like those that host fan fiction communities, can provide evidence of the "largely invisible and inaudible" writing development that Gere claims occurs "regularly and successfully outside classroom walls" (76). Composition instructors have the opportunity to make this extracurricular writing development visible and audible by inviting students to reflect on their everyday literacy practices and to turn a critical lens on these practices. Literacy

sponsorship can provide that lens and frame the conversations instructors have with students about the agents involved in their various sites of literacy.

As I state in Chapter Three, my goal for this dissertation has also been to create a reciprocal relationship with the participants—to give something back. What I hope to give them (even if they choose to remain anonymous) is recognition for their rich extracurricular literacy practices—to honor the real work they do outside the walls of the composition classroom. In taking their work seriously, I hope to contribute to the body of scholarship that validates fan practices and to the body of work that validates students' literacy practices beyond the classroom. In the process, I can contribute to and preserve the well being of the participants and their practices as I promote critical, relevant, and engaging pedagogies that prepare students to inhabit multiple places in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and help them not only be aware of how they are pursuing literacy but also how, as Brandt so powerfully observes, literacy is in pursuit of them.

APPENDIX A  
PHASES OF FIELDWORK

May 2008-August 2008	IRB Approval Process
August 2008-September 2008	Participant Recruitment from FanFiction.Net and LiveJournal.com; begin to take field notes on the two sites
September 2008-September 2009	Interviews with participants conducted over email and CMC. Continued visits to FFN and LJ to examine rules, profile and beta pages, stories, and comments/reviews; open and axial coding; dissertation drafting
October 2009	First draft of dissertation submitted, meeting with co-chairs
January 2010-June 2010	Dissertation revising and defense
June 2010-April 2011	Dissertation revising

APPENDIX B  
DESCRIPTION OF STUDY PARTICIPANTS

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Year of Study in 2008-2009</b>	<b>Geographic Location</b>	<b>Major/Minor</b>	<b>Years of Fanfic Exp. as of 2008-2009</b>	<b>FFN and LJ?</b>	<b>Gender</b>
Rae	Freshman	Midwest	Philosophy and English	5-6	No	Female
Kayla	Taking a Year Off	East Coast	Computer Science	9	No	Female
KouTai	Freshman	Southeast	Computer Science	8	Yes	Female
FlightOfFenix	Year One, Medical Transcription Program	East Coast	Computer Science, Programming, Web Design	5	Yes	Female
Cam	Final Year, Law School	Sweden	Criminal Law	7	Yes	Female
Kit	Sophomore	East Coast	Nursing	6	Yes	Female

## APPENDIX C

### DATA COLLECTED FOR PARTICIPANTS

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Profile Pages</b>	<b>Fics</b>	<b>Reader Reviews</b>	<b>Interviews</b>
Cam	2	5	67	9
Kayla	2	5	79	9
Kit	2	5	8	9
KouTai	2	5	64	9
Rae	1	5	14	9
FlightOfFenix	2	5	136	9

## APPENDIX D

### EXCERPT FROM FIELD NOTES

**August 30, 2008**

**Memo: Communicating with Participants**

It has been a week, and I haven't heard from any of my potential participants, including those who agreed to work with me from the first round of emails I sent out. I know they are busy—after all, the discourse on their profile pages often focuses on how school and other obligations prevent them from writing as much fanfic as they'd like. And as Mike pointed out, if they have little time to do fanfic, they have even less time to do stuff for me. I didn't hear anything from the second round of emails I sent—and I included in those that participants would be compensated. I wonder if I said something wrong, or if I unintentionally offended them? Are they just not interested? Perhaps I need to consider using a medium other than the Internet/email to communicate with them. I may also try a different tactic and reach out to the writers, rather than the beta readers. I can discuss the “props” fan writers use (Gee, 1996) and clearly have other forms of data. And perhaps things will pick up once the new season starts? Jay Lemke mentioned that it would be cool to record a group watching a show—much like Jenkins does. But I think that might be an IRB nightmare: trying to find a group of *House* fanfic writers living in Michigan who watch the show together? I'll keep thinking about my options.

**June 18, 2009**

**Memo: Profile pages**

FlightOfFenix recently updated her FFN profile page, and she comes across as much more aggressive in her in her preferences. She kept some of the random personal information about herself—her height, her eye color, her piercings—but added a section she titles “RULES.” She asks fellow participants not to request or private message her their stories unless they want her “full” opinion of it. She warns them:

I will not sugar-coat my responses and I will give you CONSTRUCTIVE critique on what you need to change, fix, edit, add, delete, and so on. HONESTLY DON'T PM if your story is jumbled beyond recognition, is only one paragraph per chapter, in script format, there is no separation between dialogue and the actual story details.

Her tone, even in interviews, has always been a bit abrasive, but she comes across as particularly harsh in these rules—her tone reminds me a bit of Rae's. It's typical for participants to state their preferences on their profile pages, but not typical to use this tone—or to use all-caps. Few profile pages are a) as thorough as FOF's and b) as particular. She reinforces some of FFN's rules—no super-short chapters or script format—but also introduces some of her own rules. No doubt that her experience in multiple fan fiction sites lends her some authority to make her own rules and to reject some of the norms and conventions popular within these sites (like participants begging each other for updates.)

And it's interesting how she situates "constructive" criticism—that is, how she "warns" people that she's not going to "sugar-coat" her responses. Interesting, given that this is exactly the kind of feedback Cam and the others claim they want, yet FOF seems to need to prepare participants to brace themselves. Then again, maybe she needs to do so in FFN since participants often like this site for the exposure and instant gratification, not necessarily the "concrit."

Some of these participants have been on FFN and LJ for years, and I'm sure at some point they get sick of some of the norms and conventions that are not necessarily offensive but rather just annoying.

## APPENDIX E

### SECONDARY RESEARCH QUESTIONS

When analyzing the registration process, I asked two secondary research questions:

- 1) How does each site of literacy recruit, enable, regulate, or suppress literacy?
- 2) How does each site reveal its writing ideology to potential participants?

When analyzing the profile pages, I asked three secondary research questions:

- 1) How do the sites continue to recruit, enable, regulate, and suppress literacy vis-à-vis the profile pages and blogs?
- 2) How do they continue to articulate their writing ideology?
- 3) Do participants reinforce or resist this ideology as they attempt to position themselves vis-à-vis these pages and as they introduce other roles to the site?

When comparing profile pages, I looked at each role and posed additional research questions. For instance, when examining the role of “Author,” I asked:

- 1) What kind of personal information do participants share, and why?
- 2) How does their definition of author compare or contrast with the site’s definition of author, as stated in the terms and conditions and then reinforced in the profile pages?
- 3) Do participants articulate their generic/style/pairings preferences?
- 4) Do they discuss or somehow signal their stance on slash fiction? If so, how?
- 5) Do they make requests of visitors, and if so, what are those requests?

When analyzing the study participants’ beta profile pages, I asked the following research questions:

- 1) What information does FFN deem important, according to the prompts on the template, for beta readers to share about themselves?
- 2) What information do participants deem essential to share about themselves, according to their answers to the prompts?

3) How do beta readers articulate their personal ideology regarding writing fan fiction, and does that ideology reinforce or undermine the ideology of FFN or of *House M.D.* fan fiction?

When examining the beta interactions and the public comments posted after authors had posted their stories, I asked the following research questions:

- 1) In the beta profile pages, what values and beliefs did participants articulate to position themselves as *particular* kinds of beta readers?
- 2) Did participants—those involved in the study and also those who were responding to the study participants' stories—adhere to LJ's and FFN's rules that attempted to regulate interaction?
- 3) What were the most frequent forms of feedback?
- 4) In what ways did participants themselves serve as sponsors of literacy through their beta exchanges and public reviews of each other's stories?

## APPENDIX F

### SAMPLE INTERVIEW: CAM, INTERVIEW ONE

**1. What inspires you to participate in fan fiction?**

I think there are lots of things that inspire me to write fanfiction. Characters on TV and in books that I find interesting but don't get as much development as I'd like, storylines that pop into my head, and, for that matter, the chance to be read by a lot more people than I would if I wrote original fiction (which I also do, and therefore know that I won't get as much replies/reviews on).

**2. How long have you been writing fanfic?**

Since 2001, a bit on and off depending on how busy real life has been.

**3. How many shows/books/movies do you write for? Would you mind sharing the names of the other groups?**

It varies, but throughout the years it's been as follows: The very first fanfic I ever began writing was for the "Lois & Clark: The New Adventures of Superman" fandom. I never posted it, however. My first posted fic was a short oneshot for the fandom of "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" back in 2001. After that, I started in the "Harry Potter" fandom, dabbled in "Smallville", and these days I write for "House, MD", "NCIS" and some for "H20: Just Add Water". So in total, seven fandoms, posted in six.

**4. Are there differences between each sub-group in terms of the expectations for the writing?**

Two things differ, in my opinion – the expectations on the quality of the fic, and the genres "allowed". By the quality of the fic, I mean that the more readers there are, the lower are the expectations. For example, there are 370 000 fics in the "Harry Potter" section of fanfiction.net, and whether or not your fic is any good (by way of plot, grammar, spelling, characterization, etc) your fic is highly likely to get a review. The same standard of fic posted in the "NCIS" category, where there are by comparison 7 000 fics, will probably not get any reviews at all, or a lot fewer, and more negative reviews (telling you you need a beta and such). As for the genres "allowed", it might be obvious – genres that are fantasy to begin with (such as "Buffy", "Harry Potter", and "H20: Just Add Water" (which is about three girls who can turn into mermaids)) are more accepted as to having crazy storylines, like mpreg (male pregnancy), turning into babies, and stuff like that. Reality series, like "House" and "NCIS" are expected to stay in reality more, and the opposition to fantasy in these genres are bigger. However, executed well, almost any fic is accepted in almost any fandom, in my experience.

**5. How do you negotiate those differences?**

I don't, not really. I write the same way for "Harry Potter" as I do for "NCIS", as far as the quality of the fic goes. I do tend to stay within the genre, but that's mainly because I have a hard time coming up with the reasons for

someone suddenly turning into a baby, or growing wings, in a fandom based on the reality in which I live.

**6. Do you conduct research when you write stories? If so, what kind of research? (Please name specific sources, whether they are blogs, dictionaries, other fan sites, gossip sites, etc.)**

Yes. What kind depends on the story – a story I recently posted, I had to research the meaning of a Tarot card. I use Wikipedia quite a bit, and Google whatever else I may need. I also use my LiveJournal (bananacosmic.livejournal.com) to ask questions where I can't easily find the answer online – such as laws of a specific state, medical information, and so on.

**7. Do you submit work to beta readers? If so, what motivates you to do so? Likewise, if not, why?**

I used to, but I rarely do so anymore. I want to do it, because it helps me get better, to get feedback, and it gives me a chance to post stories with as little mistakes as possible online. However, it is hard to find a good beta. I want to be able to post the stories I write within a few weeks preferably (after they're finished; I never post unfinished stories). To have a beta with a turnaround time of two months is therefore impossible. Also, the beta needs to know her grammar and spelling very well for her to be of any use to me, as well as the fandom for which I write. It was easier in the "Harry Potter" fandom, than in the smaller fandoms. The more people, the more likely someone wants to beta. These days, for the smaller fandoms, I simply read through my stories at least twice after writing them, and hopefully, I catch as much as possible of the mistakes.

**8. Do you participate in other writing communities beyond fanfic, either online or offline?**

I only post my original works on [name of site.]<sup>58</sup> I'm not sure if that constitutes as participating in a community.

**9. Describe your experiences in college composition courses. (You can also recall your experiences in high school writing classes, especially if that is when you started writing fanfic.)**

I study law at a Swedish university; we have no composition courses.

**10. How does the writing process differ in fan fiction compared to other communities/spaces, including the classroom?**

I find it easier, because I'm not bound to any rules, really. I can write in whatever form I want – present tense, past tense, first person, third person, etc. I also find it easier because I do it because I want to rather than because I have to.

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<sup>58</sup> Name of site removed to protect her privacy.

**11. Does the writing you do in one space inform the writing you do in another space?**

Probably, in terms of me getting better at expressing myself.

**12. What kinds of advice from fans/beta readers to you find most helpful?**

Suggestions on where to go with a fic (if I haven't finished it by the time I send it to the beta). Otherwise, suggestions on the structure of the story and the characterizations, as fanfiction is based on characters set by someone else – I need to stay within those limits, otherwise it's not fanfiction, but original fiction with the names from a show/book. Spelling and grammar mistakes of course need to be pointed out, but they're hardly the most helpful.

**13. What kinds of advice from fans/beta readers to you find least helpful?**

“Squee”-comments about how great the fic is. It is fun to read, but it really doesn't help. The exception is when it's a “cheerleader” that's supposed to cheer me on whilst I write the fic, so I don't stop writing.

**14. Are there particular kinds of advice that you resist?**

Not really, no.

**15. When you create your profile, what information is important to share/not share? What identity/identities are you trying/not trying to convey? How might these identities differ across different spaces?**

I try not to give away so much as for it to be possible to identify me by reading my profile. I am proud of the work I do, so that's not the reason why I don't want to be identified – it is simply a way of staying safe online. As most of my identities across spaces are cross linked, they don't change much. My fanfiction.net account links to my personal website, and my personal website links to my work website. Therefore, I can't post anything that's very personal on either of these sites (like my phone number), because it'd be too easy to find.

**16. Do you consider yourself a writer within the fanfic world?**

Yes. After over 50 stories for different fandoms, it's hard to consider myself anything but.

**17. Do you consider yourself a writer beyond the fanfic world?**

Yes. I write enough original fiction for me to feel like a writer.

**18. Do your experiences in fanfic make you feel like you are a part of a community?**

Definitely. Fanfiction has introduced me to many of the communities I currently visit regularly.

**19. Anything else you'd like to tell me about your experiences in fanfic—as a reader, writer, fan, etc.?**

Not really, no

## APPENDIX G

### DATA ANALYSIS PROCEDURES

Data source	Analysis procedure	Product of analysis
54 interview transcripts	Open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to create codes	42-page master list of interview codes collected from participants' answers to a range of questions
	Axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) resulting in patterns across codes	Short memos and "integrative memos" (Emersen, Fretz, and Shaw, 1995) containing warranted assertions (Erickson, 1986) describing generalized patterns
10 pages of fieldnotes	Selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) for events and illustrations that illustrate patterns identified through interviews	Partial index of significant fieldwork moments; significant moments flagged throughout collection of fieldnotes (Post-it notes)

## APPENDIX H

### EXCERPT FROM INTERVIEW CATEGORIES

#### Category: Research and Resources Participants Use

##### → Taken from Questions Across Multiple Interviews:

- **Question 6 (Q6) from Interview 1:** Do you conduct research when you write stories? If so, what kind of research? (Please name specific sources, whether they are blogs, dictionaries, other fan sites, gossip sites, etc.)
- **Question 8 (Q8) from Interview 1:** Do you participate in other writing communities beyond fanfic, either online or offline?
- **Question 12 (Q8) from Interview 1:** What kinds of advice from fans/beta readers to you find most helpful?

#### Cam, Interview 1:

- **Q6:** “Yes. What kind depends on the story – a story I recently posted, I had to research the meaning of a Tarot card. I use Wikipedia quite a bit, and Google whatever else I may need. I also use my LiveJournal [...] to ask questions where I can’t easily find the answer online – such as laws of a specific state, medical information, and so on.”

#### KouTai, Interview 1:

- **Q6:** “Sometimes. Wikipedia is a big help when I suddenly blank on a fact. The books on my desk are also a very big help. I usually own something related to what I write. So if I want to write a *Twilight* story on a specific moment, I’ll reach over for one of the books and hunt the moment out. YouTube is also great when I want to quickly watch a clip for inspiration.”

#### KouTai, Interview 1:

- **Q8:** “I also rpg, which is a great exercise for fan fiction.”  
**Follow-up from Interview 2:** “Rpg. Role Playing Game. There are a lot of them floating about on the internet. I’m a part of a few of them, actually. You can be OC or Canon, which is where it can get interesting. It’s like writing a lot.”

#### Kayla, Interview 1:

- **Q12:** “This might sound geeky, but when I’m in a dry spell, I usually roleplay (RP). Not in the dirty sense, but there’s this website I am a part of where many of the users roleplay. For me, it’s like writing a story with someone else. Eventually, you come across this exciting plot and it gets the juices flowing enough. Inspiration is a wonderful thing.”

**Rae, Interview 1:**

- **Q6:** “For example, my current primary focus is *House, M.D.* This is a medical show, so I’ve had to do some research into medical conditions and terminology for some longer works. Sites like the American Medical Association and WebMD have helped me get the conditions and vocabulary right.”

**Kit/Maria, Interview 1:**

- **Q6:** “I don’t research much I’m ashamed to say. For quick information I go to Wikipedia and I am very fortunate as to have a beta-writer [sic] that is talented at finding information on the internet. But I have done research before; for serious research I used google [sic] search as it is the cleanest search engine (to me).”

**WG, Conversation from Interview 1:**

- “I used to do research on Cajun culture b/c Remy (Gambit) is Cajun and I needed to brush up on a little Cajun French, don’t as me now b/c I hardly remember a lot of it.”

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