

Shared Passions, Shared Compositions: Online Fandom Communities and Affinity Groups as Sites for Public Writing Pedagogy

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Abstract

This article explores the rhetorical behaviors and attendant compositions of fandoms across spaces to make pedagogical suggestions for the incorporation of fandom activities into the writing classrooms. I look at fandoms as a representative for online communities and/or affinity groups, to examine how shared identities and experiences are constructed within online spaces specifically through the creation and circulation of multimodal compositions. Ultimately, I propose a new way of positioning public writing and expanding its potential role in the composition classroom. Building upon work on public writing arguing for the incorporation of the mundane into public writing pedagogy and scholarship in writing studies, rhetoric, and digital media studies on fandoms, I argue that we can turn to the everyday compositional practices and rhetorical engagements of online communities and affinity groups as sites of public writing pedagogy. In short, we can locate new publics for public writing.

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1. Introduction: Fandom, Communities, and Composition

This article explores the rhetorical behaviors and attendant compositions of fans across fandom spaces to make pedagogical suggestions for the incorporation of fandom activities into writing classrooms. I look at fandoms as a representative for online communities and/or affinity groups to examine how shared identities and experiences are constructed within online spaces specifically through the creation and circulation of multimodal compositions. Ultimately, I propose a new approach to public writing pedagogy and expanding its potential role in the composition classroom.

Building upon work on public writing arguing for the incorporation of the mundane into public writing pedagogy (Weisser, 2002; Rivers & Weber, 2011; Gogan, 2014) and scholarship in writing studies, rhetoric, and digital media studies on fandoms (Black, 2007; Black, 2009; Urbanski, 2010; Hinck, 2012; Potts, 2015; and Kelley, 2016), I argue that we can turn to the everyday compositional practices and rhetorical engagements of online fandom communities

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and affinity groups as sites of public writing pedagogy. In short, we can locate new publics for public writing. The notion of public writing—speaking or composing to and for a public audience—relies on being able to locate and define that public. Identifying (or sometimes even creating) communities of practice into which one can speak has been one method promoted within composition studies. I take insights from public writing pedagogy and apply them within the realm of online fandoms, locating new spaces where lessons from composition studies can inform individuals' everyday literacy practices and vice versa. For teachers and researchers in rhetoric, writing, and digital media studies, these online community and affinity spaces can be viewed as locations of public writing and rhetorical composing. Moreover, these spaces and publics can represent opportunities for students to engage topics and issues that matter to them, reframing conversations about public writing within composition studies to begin with students' interests and identities by valuing the publics to which they already belong. As Ashley A. Hinck argues, “fandoms and their fan groups [can] become publics—groups of people who affect and act within the public sphere” (2012, 1.4).

Focusing both on fandom activities on LiveJournal as well as Tumblr, I make the case that fandoms can function as an example of the sort of publics and online communities that individuals interact with online everyday; further, these fandom communities and groups can provide examples of the rhetorical activities and composing practices that characterize some online communities (see Black, 2007; Black, 2009; Urbanski, 2010; Potts, 2015; Kelley, 2016 for examples of key literacy practices in fan communities). I focus in this piece on the *A Song of Ice and Fire* (ASOIAF) and *Game of Thrones* (GoT) fandoms as they exist on LiveJournal and Tumblr, two internet outposts of online communities and affinity groups, the former legacy, though still used by some fans, and the latter current. I explore how the fandoms work across both of these spaces through multimodal compositions to support the rhetorical goals of the fandom community.

Specifically, I identify three lessons from these spaces that have implications for how we address community and affinity groups and public writing in the writing classroom:

1. **Locating new publics for public writing**—Composing practices in online fandom spaces demonstrate how rhetorical negotiations challenge dominant power structures sometimes found in public writing pedagogy and discourse. Developing and identifying new publics (Rice, 2012) and counterpublics (Fraser, 1990; Weisser, 2002) for rhetorical and digital civic engagements creates new opportunities for students to write and compose for public audiences that they value.
2. **Making affective engagements central to our pedagogy**—Integrating online communities and affinity groups, like fandoms, into writing, rhetoric, and digital media studies classrooms can enable instructors to build a pedagogy that begins where the students already are. By offering students a site of public and civic engagement that already matters and is meaningful to them, teachers can potentially create a student-centered approach to composition and literacy learning that highlights and values students' passions, interests, and what they believe to constitute meaningful communication for change (Micciche, 2007).
3. **Teaching transferable skills for public writing and composition**—Composing for online communities and affinity groups can encourage students to engage with public audiences for specific purposes through their composing practices. With such a focus, students may be able to link composing and writing strategies, such as peer review and/or tailoring arguments for specific audiences, to real-life stakes and situations that may, in turn, be transferred to composing situations both within and beyond educational settings.

Linking fandom composing practices and public writing scholarship, I argue that the rhetorical identity work that occurs within these spaces via multimodal composition creates not only a collective, group *ethos* but also a built-in audience and rhetorical exigency for composition. Bringing these audiences and rhetorical situations into the composition classroom can encourage students to engage with public writing in new ways and within new environments, continuing to move beyond traditional forms of public writing pedagogies (like the “usual suspects: letters to the student newspaper, or even the hometown newspaper, speaking before city council or the state assembly” (Wells, 1996, p. 326)). I conclude with suggestions for implementation of the lessons derived from these spaces within the composition classroom.

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