

# Fandom's Alchemy in the Classroom: Leaden Realities to Golden Possibilities

Review by Laurel Bassett

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Howell, Katherine Anderson. *Fandom as Classroom Practice*. University of Iowa Press, 2018.

*Fandom as Classroom Practice* describes undergraduate projects where students explore a wide range of academic subjects from a fan culture perspective. Skirting the quicksand of apathy, fear and accidental lemming transformation, they launch from platforms (such as Tumblr) and praxis (such as emulative writing) to grab the gold coins of education: taking risks and building networks of collective intelligence. The courses cover a wide range of fan experiences including fan pilgrimage and fan practices of appropriation, collaborative work, scanlation, vidding, and race and gender bending. Fandom becomes a portkey to literature, the social sciences, economics, ESOL, foreign language acquisition, and theoretical approaches including feminism, deconstruction, queer studies, and critical race theory. While several of the authors self-identify as fans, they have left their Harry Potter robes in the closet; these are classes for the mainstream.

Chapters come from both professors and students, written in discipline-specific styles. Both editor and contributors assiduously avoid defining fan studies, aside from Rukmini Pande's definition of media fandom as "communities of fans that interact with popular cultural texts in various ways to produce and consume transformative fanworks." So, what is fandom and what makes fan methods different and exciting for educators? Emulative storytelling is a practice older than schools, learning by subverting is at least as old as Socrates. But there is indeed a difference; student engagement, autonomy and experimentation are all on offer here.

For those new to the discipline, Paul Booth's contribution provides a welcome overview of the waves of fan studies. Part of his course, featured in this anthology, offers a historical progression at the macro level; at the micro-level, he asks his students to explore new realms of the fan universe and describe their first encounters. Through engaging with what he calls "cult aspects" of a media text and creating fan fiction, students experience historical resonances while listening to the rumblings of a fan community.

Asking students to engage with pop culture is not just a matter of affinity (having students learn about things they enjoy) but about finding theory in everyday media encounters. Shannon K. Farley's presentation of powerful vids does just this. She introduces students to online critics who combine video clips with music that teases out cultural glitches in popular television shows. Fans here do deconstruction at least as well as theorists, noting trends of violence against women, stereotyping and homoerotic imagery. John Saunders' student-response chapter, where he considers applying deconstruction to video games he designs, demonstrates new perspective gained at the feet of fan creations.

Discussions led by Rukmini Pande on race and culture in media texts cause students to question their own biases. She asks her students to take the role of casting agents for a new version of *The Lion King*. This leads to productive discomfort and discovery when students find themselves casting white actors in the lead roles. Her approach forces students to examine their own reactions and identify possibilities for disruption via performers who long to take center stage.

Not all the chapters deal overtly with issues of race, gender, and nationality, but all of them are ultimately about communication. The chapter on the Informal Learning Environment at Dalarna University in Sweden introduces fanfiction and scanlation methods to strengthen language acquisition and cross-cultural communication. Of particular interest is Hiroko Inose's assignment, which asks students to translate manga, capturing aesthetics and

meaning while maintaining a consistent voice among translators on the team. Collaborative writing and editing, a significant element of the fanosphere, give Japanese classes a feeling of connection and purpose.

Students across chapters are participant observers in both humanities and social science disciplines. They demonstrate a curious blend of responses, equal parts empathy and critique. Maura Grady, Richard Roberson, Jr. and Erika Gallion's innovative collaboration with a fan-tourism experience has students work as market researchers on the Shawshank Trail, a guided experience at sites where the movie was filmed. Creative responses to texts and healthy critique through anonymous posts encouraged by Leslie Leonard and Lee Hibbard lead students to participate as proto-fans.

Everyman-ish excitement over the landscapes of Tolkien, Mad Max, Firefly and many others suffuses each chapter. Anna Smolt's intricately designed artistic response project and accompanying journal give students a tangible connection to Tolkien's distant world and the historically distant medieval period from which he drew his inspiration. She describes and includes student photography, artwork and fiction offerings which students present publicly at the end of the semester. Smolt talks about how to ensure academic rigor within these projects and provides compelling arguments for encouraging this type of expression.

There is a bit of Mordor lurking in fanspaces: online fan communities can be rife with sexism, racism, classism and xenophobia. These authors acknowledge the dark side of fan communities, though this collection steers clear of the carnal aspects of fandom. Fortunately, it also bypasses the smut of the academic community: it is refreshingly free of lofty big-word-ism, teacher-splaining and the Kool-aid offers of preach-speak. These professors give generous and pragmatic summaries of what works and what doesn't, fully acknowledging that many students do not identify as fans and that many fans are justly suspicious of academic incursions onto their sacred ground.

It is all too easy to downplay cosplay or look askance at teachers' desperate efforts to focus the glazed stares of our nation's future. Do educators run the risk of wearing mom jeans or is it oddly hip to know the secret knock? Editor Katherine Anderson Howell is passionate in declaring fan studies a discipline, not a gimmick. Further, she insists on a moral imperative for working in the style of fan communities. Howell states "the invitations into the more participatory classroom culture represented in this volume have a fundamentally ethical component: when our invitations are inclusive in the ways that fans have the potential to be, we democratize the classroom."

A big claim, but her contributors largely bear it out. This is a book for teachers, professors and the interested novitiate who gives too much of a damn about *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*. It tackles the bewildering array of interdisciplinary connections inherent in fandom studies. It functions as an early historical record for how the methods of the remix classroom can be taught as a legitimate means of intellectual development. While some consider fan practices escapist obsession, these educators focus on the academic potential of fan communities. Certainly, the academy needs more students who speak up, share often and read critically.

As much access as the book provides, it misses an opportunity to address the needs and potentials for differently abled students. The virtual sphere provides an exciting freedom from physical strictures and a disturbing potential for bullying and discrimination for such participants. Teachers who use this book as inspiration will surely expand the reach of these classroom practices to include such voices, experiences and technologies (braille tablets and the like).

The lessons are compelling, and the teachers are bold and engaged, but it is the student-generated experiments that stay with the reader. I was wildly curious to learn more about a student's fan-fic variant (in French) of Sartre's *No Exit*; "hell is other people" is an intriguing thesis for collaboratively edited work. The presentation of these projects includes syllabi, grading rubrics and data from student exit surveys. It would be possible to cut and paste from this text into a lesson plan, and that approach might even work. But that is not quite what this book is for. These examples are there so that educators can *fan* them. Emulate, tear apart, reformat, expand. There is a practical magic between the pages of this book: it is not a handbook but a source text waiting for its own cohort of fans.

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## Cite this Essay

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