

Fan culture as an informal learning environment

Presentation of an NGL project

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ABSTRACT

Fan culture is a subculture that has developed explosively on the internet over the last decades. Fans are creating their own films, translations, fiction, fan art, blogs, role play and also various forms that are all based on familiar popular culture creations like TV-series, bestsellers, anime, manga stories and games. In our project, we analyze two of these subculture genres, fan fiction and scanlation.

Amateurs, and sometimes professional writers, create new stories by adapting and developing existing storylines and characters from the original. In this way, a "network" of texts occurs, and writers step into an intertextual dialogue with established writers such as JK Rowling (*Harry Potter*) and Stephanie Meyer (*Twilight*). Literary reception and creation then merge into a rich reciprocal creative activity which includes comments and feedback from the participators in the community.

The critical attitude of the fans regarding quality and the frustration at waiting for the official translation of manga books led to the development of *scanlation*, which is an amateur translation of manga distributed on the internet.

Today, young internet users get involved in conceptual discussions of intertextuality and narrative structures through fan activity. In the

case of *scanlation*, the scanlators practice the skills and techniques of translating in an informal environment. This phenomenon of participatory culture has been observed by scholars and it is concluded that they contribute to the development of a student's literacy and foreign language skills. Furthermore, there is no doubt that the fandom related to Japanese cultural products such as manga, anime and videogames is one of the strong motives for foreign students to start learning Japanese.

This is something to take into pedagogical consideration when we develop web-based courses. *Fan fiction* and *fan culture* make it possible to have an intensive transcultural dialogue between participators throughout the world and is of great interest when studying the interaction between formal and informal learning that puts the student in focus.

Keywords: fan culture, fan fiction, scanlation, informal learning environment, participatory culture

INTRODUCTION

In order to better meet the needs of the New Generation of students, our challenge will be to develop new pedagogical thinking to accompany new technologies. This has led us to take a closer look at informal learning environments taking place on the internet today. The present study builds on interesting and important

previous research from scholars like Marc Prensky, James Paul Gee, Henry Jenkins and Christina Olin-Scheller, when we are taking as a premise that a favorable learning situation and learning outcome is taking place in fan culture online communities today.

Marc Prensky has suggested that the so-called decline in today's educational system is due to a discrepancy between how young people access new information and knowledge through online communities, and the traditional methodology used by their teachers to educate them. And to describe this he uses the metaphor: *digital natives* and *digital immigrants*, referring to a generation that has grown up with these new technologies and an older generation that has had to adapt to them. (Prensky 2001) Also James Paul Gee has convincingly shown in his study *Situated Language and Learning: A Critique of Traditional Schooling* (2004) how young people can learn "more" from their after-school activities than from traditional schooling (for example, complex problem solving from videogames). In his latest book *Language and learning in a Digital Age* (2011) he emphasizes learning environments and popular culture and he recognizes it as a "new learning system" and invents a new term to define it:

The new learning system, competing today in many respects with our school systems, is learning as part of popular culture. (---) There is no "official" name for this type of learning, so we will have to make one up. We will call it "passionate affinity-based learning." Passionate affinity-based learning occurs when people organize themselves in the real world and/or via the Internet (or a virtual world) to learn something connected to a shared endeavor, interest, or passion. (Gee 2011:69)

In our paper we will focus on how communities of *fan culture* – with the examples of the two subgenres *fan fiction* and *scanlation activity* - function as an informal learning environment on

the internet. It aims to identify and discuss some elements in these fan communities that probably benefit the learning situation. We are interested in the learning process, per se, rather than proving or evaluating specific learning outcomes. Furthermore, we will try to identify and discuss some elements within this process that benefits the learning environment. We will start with a brief introduction to fan communities and then continue on to the learning processes taking place on fan fiction and scanlation sites.

Fan culture is a subculture that has developed explosively on the internet during the last decades. Fans are creating their own films, translations, fiction, fan art, blogs, role play and also various forums that are all based on familiar popular culture creations like TV-series, bestsellers, anime, manga stories and games.

On fan culture community websites young people learn how to write, comment on and translate texts. On fan fiction websites fans create new stories by adapting and developing existing storylines and characters from the original; get involved in an intensive dialogue between reader and writer and have conceptual discussions on intertextuality and narrative structures. In the case of *scanlation*, the scanlators practice the skills and techniques of translating, as well as acquiring Japanese language abilities, in an informal environment. Art reception and creation then merge into a rich reciprocal creative activity which includes comments and feedback from the participators in the community.

In 1992 Henry Jenkins wrote a groundbreaking study on fan culture where he deconstructed the prevailing negative image of a fan as a stereotypical fanatic and reinterpreted her or him as passionate and creative community member. Since then, fandom has taken the step into online communities and experienced an explosive

development, both in the form of an increased number of participants as well as in social credit. Fan culture is now a completely transnational activity where people from all over the world come together in their shared passion for a specific fandom. Henry Jenkins characterizes a fan as follows, and the quotation also illustrates what he has defined as a Participatory culture:

This ability to transform personal reaction into social interaction, spectatorial culture into participatory culture, is one of the central characteristics of fandom. One becomes a “fan” not by being a regular viewer of a particular program but by translating that viewing into some kind of cultural activity, by sharing feelings and thoughts about the program content with friends, by joining a “community” of other fans who share common interests. For fans, consumption naturally sparks production, reading generates writing, until the terms seem logically inseparable...

(Jenkins 2006: 41)

This passage points to some important elements for a favorable learning situation namely: a shared passion for the fandom and an emotional investment in the material as a strong motivator for writing and participating. The fan communities are particularly good examples of *participatory culture* - where consumers and producers blend together into “prosumers” and the key word here is “sharing”. James Paul Gee was seen in the citation shown earlier on his concept of “passionate affinity-based learning” and Prensky agrees with Jenkins on passion as the key element.

In the following sections, we will see two types of fan activities, identifying the elements that would benefit their function as an informal learning environment.

FAN FICTION

Feedback: Reviews and beta readers

In an article in the Swedish newspaper *Svenska Dagbladet*, the author Jennifer deLucy emphasizes the fan fiction world as a “writing school”, where everyone, even professional writers like herself, has something to learn. Even if most of the fan fiction writers may be amateurs there also are the more experienced who supervise the less experienced. Under the tag “Review this story” on the website *fanfiction.net* every reader has the possibility to give feedback and interact with the author. The feedback from other fans often comes quickly, since the fans share the same interests – the same passion for a fandom – and normally react on the new stories immediately. It’s an ongoing discussion; it’s not only one comment from the teacher like in the traditional teacher-student relationship. Here, writers have the possibility to argue an opinion or just ask what the reviewers mean by something. They also develop skills in these “metatalks” in how to analyze their own writing and they’re having theoretical discussions about the interpretations of the source texts (Wenz 2010; Olin-Scheller 2009). For example the question “When does fan fiction become literature?” is being discussed in a forum on *fanfiction.net*. (<http://forum.fanfiction.net/topic/2872/56836699/1/> 2012-02-15)

Author and readers accordingly meet in this ongoing and intensive dialogue. They act as teachers/mentors for each other; they comment on texts, structure, characters, style, grammar, etc. The feedback ranges from very positive comments to concrete suggestions about how to improve the text, depending on how experienced the writer is. Sometimes the new writers are quite “educated” by others, like the signature

The Moons Feather, who has written two fan fictions on *Inkheart* on fanfiction.net. As most new writers, she asks for reviews before her story starts. On her personal profile, she informs everyone about herself and tells her favourites in different categories, for example her favourite fan fiction writer; that's Kallypso, who reviews the first chapters of her first fanfic *InkClover*. Kallypso notices that The Moons Feathers story needs more work and gives her quite detailed instructions for how to improve her writing:

Number 1: Take your time. Don't be afraid to slow down and take time to describe the scene. You brush over the majority of a chapter with just a few sentences. Even though whoever is reading your fanfic has read *Inkheart* you should not be afraid to use more detail. If you don't want to spend too much time on the old scene you can always use space to develop your character and maybe delve more into her thoughts. So far I don't get much of a sense of who Clover is or what her personality is like. She's a writer... that's basically all I know. Writers are very interesting people. Explore her some more, add in some back story. Dramatic back stories can be your friend :)

Number 2: If you plan on having really short chapters then update them alot quicker. I know, again from experience, that if you don't update quickly you might lose alot of potential readers.

[...] I'd be glad to help you any time you need me to. I was once a beginner to and it takes awhile to get into the swing of things. (<http://www.fanfiction.net/r/7478112/> 2012-01-30)

Some days later, The Moons Feather has published more chapters of her story and Kallypso writes another comment. ("You took some of my advice :) Thanks for spending some time with Clover this chapter and giving some back story. i want to see more of what happened to her. Still don't be afraid to flesh out descriptions a little more. Another little note,

every time someone different talks make a new paragraph. It makes your chapters seem longer anyway :)"

(<http://www.fanfiction.net/r/7478112/> 2012-01-30) Significant to note here, is that even though there is a very clear teacher-student situation, the student asks for feedback and is really happy about it. The discussion on the published text usually starts directly. This immediate feedback – that even if it's critical, often contains some positive feedback like "update soon" – is probably an important element for learning.

Also beta readers (proof readers) are available to offer help *before* an author decides to publish a text on fanfiction.net. In this way, the participatory culture with its informal "mentoring" is very clear: The more experienced contributors read the texts of the less experienced and teach and support them. The definition of a beta reader on fanfiction.net is "a person 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." (<http://www.fanfiction.net/betareaders/> 2012-01-09) For example, we can take a look at one registered beta reader on this webpage, Detafo. She has written 14 stories (fan fictions) for *Silence of the Lambs*, *Cats*, *Twilight*, *Alice in Wonderland* and some more. All registered beta readers on fanfiction.net have a beta description, where we get to know what their strengths and weaknesses are and what they prefer to read (and prefer not to). Detafo gives the following general description on her beta reader profile:

I'm OCD when it comes to spelling and grammar. I spend AGES on my own fics before I post them, making sure the wording sounds right. I like to make things sound like they come from the time period in which they are set, so it sounds more believable. For example, if the story is set in the 1860's, I

don't use abbreviated terms such as 'c'mon' and 'hey'. To me it... it's insulting. Be warned that if I beta-read your fics, I might just go Nazi on things like that. Unless you ask me nicely not to ;)
(<http://www.fanfiction.net/beta/168470/Detafo>
2012-01-09)

Detafo thus has an awareness of writing from different periods and historical language. She adjusts the style and the language to the time in which the story is taking place.

Anonymity

Most writers of fan fiction use screen names which means that we don't know their age, sex, where they live, etc. The fact that you don't know who the person behind the screen name is makes the distinction between amateurs and professionals more difficult. They're all anonymous and in the first place they identify themselves as part of the fan community, as prosumers (the mixture of producers and consumers), not young teenagers or professional writers. Some users sign up with very well-constructed pseudonyms that really show their personality and their values, or they sign up using nicknames that express the identity they'd like to have. In this way the fan fiction writers have the possibility to try different roles and different identities. (Olin-Scheller & Wikström 2010; Olin-Scheller 2009)

The anonymity thus plays an important role since it encourages learning and teaching activities. It probably gives (at least some) fanfic writers the courage to publish and it also creates a freedom to express oneself since you can have an online identity or even use many different pseudonyms in different fandoms. You're also free to write about themes that you wouldn't have done otherwise. For example the fan fiction writer MartinP in a Swedish study from 2010 by Olin-Scheller & Wikström describes a girl's sexual debut and this is a theme that he probably

wouldn't have chosen whether in the classroom or on the fan fiction website if he hadn't been anonymous.

SCANLATION

"Scanlation" is a term that combines "scanning" and "translation", and started in the late 1990s. Overseas fans of Japanese manga were frustrated that there were many works that were not translated and published abroad, and started making their own translation of the scanned original version. They were all circulated by through the internet.

With time, this has grown into a major practice, and although there is a growing conflict with the publishers over the copyright issue, it has not ceased by any means. The motives today for fans to translate manga work and to read fan translated manga could be summarised as two – to read what is not translated abroad, and to read the next chapter of a series as soon as it is published in Japan. Many manga works are published in weekly magazines but it takes months for official translations to come out.

Authors such as O'Hagan (2008), Diaz-Cintas (2006) or Ferrer (2005) have published articles on scanlation, but mostly to give an overview of the phenomenon. Of those authors, O'Hagan (ibid.) suggested the possibility of scanlation functioning as an informal translator training, an idea which is closely related to the theme of this paper. We would like to consider very briefly some elements we find in this particular fan activity that could drive the process of learning Japanese language, and skills for translation.

In order to be able to translate, fans have to learn Japanese, as well as translation skills. Normally the translation into English or sometimes Chinese is done directly from the Japanese original, whereas the translation into other languages is done from the English version.

Translation is taught at university and other educational institutions, but in the community sites for scanlators, such as Mangahelpers.com for example, we can see much more OJT-type translation training taking place. In this community site of scanlators, if one wants to register as a translator, one has to go through a rigorous screening, presenting five translation works that will be graded by other translators and will be ranked somewhere between S rank and D rank (there are five ranks: S,A, B,C,D). If the work is considered to be not good enough, one is classified as a “trainee”, and can not upload the translation until the quality of the translation improves.

Inside the same site, there are forums such as “Translators’ Academy”, “How to proofread” and “Japanese language study”. In those forums, quite elaborated discussions take place about how to translate particular phrases in Japanese. For example, a translator asks for advice to translate several quite difficult sentences, such as *kudaranai mougen wo hakuna. Sonnakoto wo shinakutemo*

(<http://mangahelpers.com/forum/showthread.php/75218-Variious-short-sentences>). This would literary be “Don’t vomit useless absurdity. No need for it” and the translation would be something like “Stop talking useless bullshit. No need for it”. The translator confesses he can not translate this, and some very appropriate suggestions come;

Comment 1:

From the look of it, I’m going to assume that *sonnakoto* is referring to how he’s barking out stupid without even thinking...I ‘d translate it as “Stop barking out nonsenses. It’s totally unnecessary” but I’m not totally sure unless you

give me some context to it though.

Comment 2:

Hakuna is a rougher imperative than *hakanaide*. *Shinakutemo* is a truncated version of *shinakutemo ii*. “Just stop talking about that nonsense already. No one cares”.

Another forum teaches you how to proofread, an important skill you should learn in translator training. The forum teaches you not only techniques, such as to compare the original and translation, but also more tangible tips such as to get in touch with the translator when not sure about the interpretation of the text, or consideration about use of the slang, if it is appropriate to use slang in the translation for the character or situation. Finally, as many fan translators teach themselves Japanese, information sharing and peer teaching of the language is very common in these sites. Information on the basic phonetics, language history, register, basic grammar and other online resources are shared often, and then sometimes the discussion develops into topics such as how to prepare for the official Japanese language proficiency test, JPLT, both for elementary and higher levels.

There is also an important element of feedback. Translation per se is a skill acquired and used because there is a need for it – someone needs the translation to understand what he wants to understand. Feedback, therefore, could be the strong motive for a translator to continue translating, especially if the translator is not paid as in the case of scanlation.

In the scanlation sites, numerous comments are posted from right after uploading a newly translated work. They are comments of gratitude, or requests to translate the following chapter, as well as comments on the translated

work itself. Though translators use pseudonyms, normally one can keep track of what he translates, and in the aforementioned community site (Mangahelpers.com), readers could become “fans” of a certain translator, mainly for the selection of work he translates. In these fan pages, fans can post comments of not just gratitude but also of serious interest in how the translator learned Japanese or the analysis of the manga work he translates. In other words, they are of the most gratifying topics that fans, including the translator himself, could participate passionately in.

CONCLUSION

As has been seen very briefly, in both fan activities – fan fiction and scanlation –the passion to create, teach, learn and evaluate, and not only to consume, is found. And this is exactly what Prensky (2010) points out in his book *Teaching Digital Natives* as what today’s students want and do not receive – learn by pursuing their passion and interest, desire to create using the tools of their time, and learn something real, not just relevant. In the fan community, or what James Paul Gee calls a learning system embedded in the popular culture, we see elements that fulfil these needs, and an environment where fans acquire such skills as writing, translating, or foreign language. How to incorporate, or make use of this informal learning environment in next generation learning is one of the major questions that we have to pursue in our NGL project.

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