

English-Language Learners, Fan Communities, and 21st-Century Skills

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Globalization is a term often used to describe the increasing flow of people, ideas, goods, and capital across national borders (Appadurai, 1996; Suárez-Orozco & Qin-Hilliard, 2004). In many ways, globalization has been facilitated by and tied to new tools and technologies. For example, new technologies have played a significant role in expediting transportation and communication across physical space, which in turn has made it easier for people to live, communicate, and conduct business across national borders. As technology and such cross-border forms of social and economic practice become increasingly prevalent, it stands to reason that there also may be a concomitant shift in the sort of skills and abilities that individuals will need for effective participation in modern work, academic, and leisure environments. In recognition of such a shift, partnerships among businesses, schools, and researchers have been working toward a common understanding of the sort of so-called 21st-century skills that students should be developing as they prepare for their futures.

This article draws from literature on 21st-century skills as a framework for exploring the forms of literacy and learning that many adolescents are engaging with in out of school spaces. In particular, this article is a theoretical exploration of themes that emerged during a longitudinal ethnographic study of adolescent English-language learners' (ELLs') literate and social activities surrounding online fan fiction. Fan fictions are texts written about media and popular culture by fans. In these texts, fan

fiction authors take up the characters and plot-lines of the original media and creatively rework them by developing new relationships between characters, extending plot and timelines, creating new settings, and exploring novel themes. By considering how such practices relate to 21st-century skills, this article aims to provide insight on youth-led, technology-mediated learning and literacy practices and to stimulate thinking about how our understandings of 21st-century skills in out-of-school spaces might inform pedagogical approaches in the teaching of language and literacy in more formal learning environments.

Literacy and Learning in the 21st Century

21st-Century Skills

Rapid technological advances and ongoing processes of globalization have given rise to serious consideration of the goals and responsibilities for institutions of formal learning in the 21st century. The 21st Century Workforce Commission (2000) suggested that “the current and future health of America’s 21st century economy depends directly on how broadly and deeply Americans reach a new level of literacy—‘21st-Century Literacy’” (p. 4). Organizations such as the International Reading Association (2001) and the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory (NCREL; 2003) are developing educational frameworks for 21st-century literacy and

skills. Also, members of research, education, and business communities have formed partnerships to create such frameworks, working together to identify proficiencies that currently are or will be extremely valuable in future work and academic environments. These consortiums aim to strengthen the U.S. education system (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2004, n.p.) and to ensure the United States' competitiveness in a global, technology-mediated market.

The NCREL (2003) described the need for digital literacy skills on their enGauge 21st Century Skills Website, emphasizing the notion that traditional literacy skills are now only a starting point for engaging in other forms of literate interaction:

As society changes, the skills needed to negotiate the complexities of life also change. In the early 1900s, a person who had acquired simple reading, writing, and calculating skills was considered literate. Only in recent years has the public education system expected all students to build on those basics, developing a broader range of literacies. (International ICT Literacy Panel, 2002, as cited in NCREL, 2003, n.p.)

The digital literacy skills identified by various 21st-century consortiums include proficiencies such as basic print literacy, scientific, economic, technological, visual, information, and multicultural literacies as well as global awareness (NCREL, 2003). It is important to note that developing such proficiencies can pose an extra challenge for certain populations of students, such as ELLs, if they are relegated to classroom contexts where the primary focus is mastery of traditional forms of print-based literacy. Clearly it is crucial that ELLs receive quality instruction in and access to standard, academic forms of language. However, as discussion in this article will demonstrate, activities based on popular culture as well as new technologies and ICTs can offer opportunities for the development of standard language proficiency in tandem with the development of digital literacy and 21st-century skills.

Literacy in Online Contexts

In public discourse, literacy is often narrowly construed as a skill set related to the decoding and encoding of print-based texts. However, this article draws from a sociocultural approach to literacy known as the New Literacy Studies (NLS) that provides a basis for more broadly conceptualizing writing and reading as communicative practices that are rooted within certain social, historical, and political contexts of use (Gee, 1999; Hull & Schultz, 2002; Lankshear & Knobel, 2006; Street, 1984). In recent decades, work within the NLS has attempted to “extend the idea and scope of literacy pedagogy to account for the context of our culturally and linguistically diverse and increasingly globalized societies” and to “account for the burgeoning variety of text forms associated with information and multimedia technologies” (New London Group, 1996, n.p.). Such an approach is helpful for understanding the many shifts taking place as a great deal of contemporary communicative and meaning-making practices move to online, globally networked contexts. Moreover, it is particularly helpful to this article for understanding how many adolescent ELLs are developing language, literacy, and social skills across national borders, as they use new technological tools and semiotic forms to communicate, share information, and negotiate meaning with youths located in many different countries.

As many adolescents socialize and spend a great deal of time in such online, global social settings—the process of relocation for many immigrant youths also takes place at least partially in technology-mediated environments such as online discussion boards, social networking sites, fan communities, and video gaming environments. Thus, it is important to consider how youths' literacy, learning, and identity practices are both shaped by and shape the interactions they have in online spaces (Jensen, 2003). In addition, such research can help us to understand how youths take on and negotiate social roles that may have implications for learning in both on- and offline spaces.

Related Research

Digital literacy and 21st-century skills resonate with research across disciplines exploring the potential impact of technological advances (Gee, 2004; Lankshear & Knobel, 2006), global connectedness (Suárez-Orozco & Qin-Hilliard, 2004), and participatory culture (Jenkins, 1992) on youths' learning and literacy practices. For instance, research on adolescents' extracurricular engagement with technology has described an array of sophisticated literate and social practices that include but are not limited to traditional print and standard forms of English. These studies include explorations of how youths use technologies such as instant messaging to create or maintain on and offline social networks (Lewis & Fabos, 2005), or chatting to author social identities (Lam, 2004). Other studies have described multimodal practices such as digital storytelling (Hull, 2003), online journaling (Guzzetti & Gamboa, 2005), remixing (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006) or redesigning (Chandler-Olcott & Mahar, 2003a, 2003b) media texts. Through such multimodal activities, youths engage in creative manipulation of popular cultural and textual artifacts, drawing from a mixture of text, image, color, and sound as a means of representing themselves and communicating in online spaces.

The aforementioned work has provided much-needed insight on adolescents' extracurricular, technology-mediated activities. However, there has been little exploration of how youths, particularly ELLs, are developing proficiencies that are aligned with many 21st-century skills through voluntary participation in online spaces. This article addresses this gap through an explicit focus on literacy and 21st-century proficiencies in relation to the following research questions:

- What sort of 21st-century skills are youths developing through participation in online fan-related contexts?
- What is the relationship between traditional, print-based and 21st-century literacy skills in online fan fiction spaces?

- What sorts of social roles or identities are associated with 21st-century proficiencies and literacy practices?

It is important to note that while this article is based on data from case studies of adolescent ELLs literacy and social practices in online environments, the purpose of the analysis is not to present detailed ethnographic accounts of these individual learners' experiences. Instead, the purpose is to provoke a broader discussion of fan-based literacy and learning practices in relation to 21st-century skills.

Study Context and Methods

The primary context for the larger study, Fanfiction.net (FFN), is the largest online fan fiction archive, housing over a million fan fiction texts, with over 300,000 texts in the Harry Potter section alone. FFN has servers in North America, Asia, and Europe and attracts fan authors from across the globe. Fans on the site compose and publicly post texts based on their favorite media canons—including books, music, movies, Japanese animation (anime), and video games—and then the audience has the option of reading and publicly posting feedback or *reviews* of the texts. Participation on the site extends beyond posting texts for entertainment, as fans engage in activities such as peer reviewing, collaborative writing, and exploring certain genres of writing. Participation also includes substantive discussion around composition as well as discussion of the themes and topics addressed in many of the fan fiction texts (Black, 2005, 2008). Ethnographic (Geertz, 1973) and discourse analytic (Gee, 1999) methods were used to gain a rich sense of the FFN community, as I spent three years as a participant observer on the site. Primary data sources were adolescent ELL focal participants' fan fiction texts, reader reviews of these texts, and interviews with focal participants. The purpose of the larger study was to explore how this informal, online writing space might provide ELLs with access to literacy learning and how the virtual environment might promote

affiliation with composing and interacting in English.

Data discussed in this article are drawn primarily from case studies of three ELL focal participants, Grace, Nanako, and Cherry-chan (all names are pseudonyms). Although Grace, Nanako, and Cherry-chan are all ELLs, these young women differ greatly in terms of experiences with and exposure not only to English but also to other languages. Grace is a popular fan fiction authoress from the Philippines who has written many multichapter stories on FFN since 2001. She grew up speaking Kapangpangan, which she considers her first language, and she began learning Filipino (a standardized version of Tagalog) at an early age and used Filipino for most academic activities in early grade school. At around age 7, Grace also began learning English in school. Much of her productive experience with English has been in written rather than spoken format, as she primarily has used English for her academic activities, online communications, and fan fiction compositions.

Nanako is a generation 1.5 Chinese immigrant who moved from Shanghai to Canada with her parents and began learning English when she was 11. Nanako's family speaks Mandarin Chinese at home, and Nanako was fully literate in Chinese when she immigrated to North America. Cherry-chan, on the other hand, is a second generation immigrant whose family moved to Canada from Taiwan before she was born. Of the three focal participants, Cherry-chan is the only one who grew up speaking languages that she is not fully literate in. In an interview, she explains that she grew up speaking Mandarin Chinese and Taiwanese, but she learned to write in English and never learned what she calls "the true basics" of writing in Chinese.

These participants were chosen for this article because they have had notably different experiences with English-language learning and exhibit proficiency with similar 21st-century skills in their online activities. Analyses from the larger study primarily focus on how Grace, Nanako, and Cherry-chan engaged in activities that were aligned with or differed from

school-based literacy practices. The following analysis extends that discussion by describing Grace, Nanako, and Cherry-chan's engagement with traditional print literacy, as well as with a range of 21st century skills including multimodal, technological, and information literacy.

Analysis: Digital Age Literacy

Print Literacy

Digital Age Literacy is a category of 21st-century skills that includes but is not limited to basic proficiency with print-based text. Other Digital Age forms of literacy include the ability to read visual and multimodal texts, as well as technological and information literacy (NCREL, 2003). In terms of basic print literacy, it is worth noting that through their fan-related activities, all three focal participants were able to practice and improve their English-language and composition skills. For example, each of these young women was able to find and work with a β -reader when producing some of their texts. According to FFN, "A beta reader (or betareader, or beta) 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" (Fanfiction.net, 2008, n.p.). Working with beta readers gave Grace, Nanako, and Cherry-chan opportunities to receive explicit feedback on their writing and rhetorical skills.

Additionally, FFN, like many fan fiction sites, has a built-in mechanism to encourage audience feedback. Specifically, each text has an option for readers to submit feedback or a "review" of the fiction. Grace and Nanako, who are dedicated fan fiction authors, have received approximately 7,600 and 9,400 reviews respectively. Cherry-chan, who infrequently updates her stories and leaves many of her fan texts unfinished, has received 650 reviews. It is important to note that most of these reader reviews are what, in a chapter exploring fan readers' feedback (Black, 2008), I have called "OMG Standards." These are a common type of review that begins with common Internet

parlance of the acronym for *Oh My God!* and “consists of enthusiastic statements of appreciation for the fiction such as, ‘OMG! I love this chapter!’” (Black, 2008, p. 107). These reviews provide authors with hearty encouragement to continue writing and can be a crucial element for helping ELLs feel comfortable composing in this space.

In addition to the short and sweet support of OMG Standards, other reviews are aimed at providing explicit feedback on grammar and spelling, as well as story elements such as plot, characterization, and adherence to genre. These reviews come in many different forms. For example, some readers pull out sentence-level excerpts of the author’s texts and explicitly discuss the errors in each sentence. Other readers will examine entire paragraphs, recasting the writing to make it more grammatically sound (see Black, 2008 for examples). Thus, the FFN community provides ELL youths with support for the development of traditional print literacy by encouraging interactions between writers and readers, promoting confidence, and helping authors to explicitly focus on different aspects of language and composition.

These basic literacy skills are building blocks of communication that are crucial to effective participation in online environments. However, it is worth noting that focal participants’ fan-related compositions, while text-based, did not rigidly adhere to the standards and conventions of print-based English. For example, as mentioned previously, the ELL focal participants often had grammatical and spelling errors in their texts. Additionally, all three focal participants incorporated languages other than English into their prose, often using Japanese or Chinese to convey certain information or for effect.

Notwithstanding errors, within the fan community, focal participants were treated as legitimate participants and interlocutors in their own right. Moreover, their multilingual texts and diverse perspectives were viewed as meaningful contributions to the “fanon” or collective body of fan knowledge (Black, 2005). As ELLs, this acceptance was important to focal

participants’ literacy and language socialization for several reasons. First, it provided them with a sense of belonging in a community that was important to them. Second, this acceptance of their writing and attempts to communicate using English, notwithstanding errors, provided inspiration and confidence for attempting additional and more complex written and communicative endeavors. Finally, the sense of acceptance and belonging enabled these ELL authors to develop identities as accomplished creators and users of English text.

Multimodal and Technological Literacy

Multimodal and technological proficiencies also fall under the realm of Digital Age Literacy and are an integral part of successful participation in fan communities. As Kress (2000) aptly pointed out, multimodality, or conveyance of meaning through multiple modes of representation, is hardly a new phenomenon, as human communication in various forms is inherently multimodal. However, the increasing prevalence of computer-mediated forms of communication has made the simultaneous integration of multiple modes of meaning a salient feature of online texts and environments.

As technological advances make new communication tools and participatory spaces available on what seems like a daily basis, the skills needed for successful online interactions are constantly in flux. For example, the interface and conventions for conveying information via work-based e-mail and instant messaging; school-based wikis, blogs, and websites; and out-of-school social networking sites (e.g., Facebook, MySpace), LiveJournals, and Massively Multiplayer Online Role-playing Games all differ significantly. Thus, learning to effectively use and adapt to such technological innovations is a skill that will serve youths well in the 21st century. Moreover, for ELLs, using multiple modes of representation to convey meaning can be an integral part of communicating effectively and taking on meaningful social roles in online environments where much of the print-based text is in English.

It is worth noting that neither Grace, Cherry-chan, nor Nanako was particularly tech-savvy when first participating on FFN. For example, Grace initially penned her fictions on paper and then paid to upload them at a local Internet café in the Philippines. Cherry-chan had virtually no Web presence and made it clear that she had very little access to the computer she shared with her family. Of the three, Nanako had the greatest computer access, although she also complained of intermittent Internet availability at times when her mother had the service disconnected. In spite of this intermittent access to the Web, Nanako did create an anime fan website during her early years of participation on FFN. However, the site still had many technical difficulties such as images that failed to load, links that were often broken, and pull-down menus that did not work, thus marking Nanako as an inexperienced Web technology user.

Over time and through participation in various fan websites Grace, Cherry-chan, and Nanako all developed a notable measure of multimodal and technological proficiency. For example, all three participants now have personal websites, LiveJournal accounts, or online forums. Multiple modes of meaning-making, such as space, color, image, movement, and sound are all integral components of how these young women design their webpages to convey their identities and affiliations with certain social and cultural groups. They also use these forms of expression to augment the content of traditional print messages and fan fiction texts. To effectively use such modes of expression, youths must have at least some measure of visual literacy and an understanding of how these multimodal elements can be combined to create meaning.

Through their participation in online spaces, all three focal participants have also developed what is known as technological literacy, or the ability to choose appropriate technology for specific activities and use it in the most effective ways (NCREL, 2003). To be more specific, these young women all alternate between communicating ideas in public

writing forums, through e-mail, or via instant messenger depending on the content and goal of their messages. For example, Grace used the public nature of online fan forums to garner widespread support from other fans when the site administrators on FFN banned some of her fictions for violating the terms of service. However, she chose e-mail as the means of contacting site administrators and effectively presenting her arguments for why her fictions were not in violation of the site rules, which ultimately led to the reinstatement of her FFN account. Through these different activities and mediums, Grace presented herself in very different social roles—in the online forums, she was a powerful self-advocate defending her right to freedom of speech; whereas in the e-mails with site administrators, she was a courteous and principled fan who would attempt to balance her own desire for creative expression with the rules of the site.

Also, as discussed previously, all three focal participants maintain several Web spaces. Maintaining these spaces requires at least some measure of proficiency with different user-interfaces, programming languages, and video and image-editing software, as well as the conventions for designing materials and conveying information in each of these contexts (i.e., conventions for communication in a LiveJournal community are quite different from those of an online anime forum). Thus, through participation in fan spaces, all three focal participants have developed skills in designing webpages; using various software programs; creating videos; and manipulating online, multimodal texts to effectively communicate and convey information.

Information Literacy

In this study, the development of focal participants' technological literacy also was closely related to another 21st-century proficiency known as information literacy. Information literacy refers to the ability to seek out and critically evaluate information across a range of media. This includes recognizing when information is needed and then using technology,

such as communication networks and electronic resources, to locate, evaluate, synthesize, and put this information to use (NCREL, 2003). One of Nanako's sources of computer-related knowledge was the computer classes she was taking in school. However, the emphasis in school-based computer classes is often on basic or mechanical aspects of computer use or computer-based reproductions of print-based activities. Thus, the skills from her computer classes did not all readily transfer to her extracurricular computer-based activities. In fact, the primary way that Grace, Nanako, and Cherry-chan developed their technological literacy was by accessing online sources of information and tapping into networks of people who were skilled at using these technologies.

This finding is akin to the findings of Chandler-Olcott and Mahar's (2003b) study investigating adolescent girls' technology-mediated literacy practices. In this article, the authors focused on two focal participants, Rhiannon and Eileen, who created and designed multimodal texts within the anime fan community. According to the authors, "both girls received a good deal of mentorship related to their technology use and their composing processes from other members of their online communities" (p. 366). The authors also emphasize the point that these young women did not receive mentorship for their technology use in schools. Instead, they relied on related print resources or went online to seek out examples of and explicit instructions for how to design tech-savvy texts.

Grace, Nanako, and Cherry-chan also engaged in such self-directed forms of learning. For example, Nanako would sometimes publicly post questions or rants about technological challenges that she was having on her webpages as a means of eliciting feedback and help from the audience. Also, all three youths visited online help sites and forums to find information about how to create and maintain their various webpages, forums, and LiveJournal accounts. In so doing, they continued to develop their information literacy skills, as they sought out information, decided which materials

were relevant to the tasks they were trying to accomplish, and then applied this information to complete their online projects and activities.

Discussion

In thinking about 21st-century proficiencies and how they might relate to classroom instruction, it is important to recognize that technology alone is not the defining characteristic of such skills. As Lankshear and Knobel (2007) aptly pointed out, technology can be used to search for information, construct essays, and communicate in ways that differ very little from traditional, print-based enactments of such practices. What makes skills and literacies "new" is how "they mobilize very different kinds of values and priorities and sensibilities than the literacies we are familiar with" (2007, p. 7). These new sensibilities allow for a flexible range of expertise in which all participants are able to take up the roles of both teacher and learner (Black, 2008; Gee, 2004; Lankshear & Knobel, 2007). For example, within the fan community, an ELL who has not yet mastered the conventions of print-based writing can still take up the role of an expert webpage designer or popular cultural expert and achieve social status and solidarity with online peers (Lam, 2000).

Such new sensibilities also place value on collaborative practices and forms of knowledge in which authorship, teaching, and learning is distributed across community members (Black, 2008; Gee, 2004; Lankshear & Knobel, 2007). One such example is the collaborative authoring of online fan texts (Black, 2008; Thomas, 2005; Yi, 2008) in which youths are able to coconstruct knowledge around a particular media text while at the same time exchanging ideas and receiving feedback on their rhetorical and composition skills. Another example is the informal mentoring and apprenticeship that the young women from this and the Chandler-Olcott and Mahar (2003a, 2003b) study received through participation in online fan communities, and how such scaffolding enabled them to develop more sophisticated technological skills. These

skills and sensibilities are often associated with the ethos of Web 2.0, in which technology users actively contribute to the content of online spaces (Lankshear & Knobel, 2007). Such skills also are related to effective instructional approaches for ELLs that involve peer-to-peer cooperative learning as well as teacher, parent, and community scaffolding. These approaches are empowering because they take an additive rather than subtractive approach to the resources that ELL learners bring to the classroom. They also support collaborative creation of classroom knowledge, and students are able to “participate competently in instruction as a result of having developed a secure sense of identity and the knowledge that their voices will be heard and respected within the classroom” (Cummins, 1996, p. 16).

Even in classrooms where technological access and resources are scarce, there are opportunities to develop lessons and activities that incorporate many of the proficiencies, sensibilities, and values associated with effective participation in the 21st century. As the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) points out,

Although technology is important to literacy in the new century, other dimensions of learning are essential. Studies of workforce readiness show that employers rate written and oral communication skills very highly, and collaboration, work ethic, critical thinking, and leadership all rank higher than proficiency in information technology. The Partnership for 21st-Century Skills advocates for core academic subjects, learning and innovation skill, and life and career skills, along with technology skills. (2007, n.p.)

Along these lines, Warschauer (2007) pointed out that the shift to online and technology-mediated contexts is making traditional print-based literacy skills perhaps more crucial than they have been at any other time in history. Thus, lessons that are grounded in a 21st-century mindset would necessarily involve a synthesis of traditional and new proficiencies.

Interestingly enough, online activities related to fandom encompass many of the proficiencies outlined in the NCTE excerpt. What

is more, these elements are not dependent on or wholly tied to technology. For instance, in addition to the traditional, print-based literacy skills that fan authors develop through composing texts, they are also developing effective collaboration and communication skills as they read, revise, discuss, and critique each other’s work. Many youths also take on leadership roles within various fan communities as they design, deploy, and maintain the content of popular websites and forums that are frequented by youths from around the world. These roles also require good communication skills as well as 21st-century and new literacy proficiencies such as diplomacy and communicating across linguistic and cultural barriers, as the fan-administrators of such sites are called upon to define appropriate content and conduct, and to mediate and resolve disputes between site members.

Fan authors, artists, β -readers, and webmasters are also developing a strong work ethic as they engage in self-motivated and self-monitored forms of content creation and set their own learning goals and standards in relation to their textual products. Collectively, these activities are all illustrative of the sort of “learning and innovation...and life and career skills” (NCTE, 2007, n.p.) that are valued in the 21st century and can be developed either in tandem with or independently of new technologies. Such activities also illustrate that ELLs, in spite of language barriers, are fully capable of using technology and multimodal forms of representation to learn and generate knowledge through participation in linguistically sophisticated and cognitively demanding tasks.

As this paper deals with literacy and literate practices, it is not surprising that an underlying theme running through the discussion is that of identity. Many adolescents spend time communicating and creating content online largely as a means of forging social connections and representing themselves and their perspectives to their peers. As adolescents develop new literacy, technology, and 21st-century proficiencies, they are also taking on the values,

mindsets (Lankshear & Knobel, 2007), and ways of being in the world (Gee, 1992) associated with such practices and digital media spaces. In terms of literacy education then, it might be useful to begin thinking about how activities in such spaces recruit identities and literacy practices and mindsets that are valuable for learning. For example, the appeal of many online communities or affinity spaces (Gee, 2004) is that they allow youths to adopt a variety of social roles including peer, mentor, learner, collaborator, technology-expert, webmaster, author, reader, and consultant. Also in these sites, youths take on leadership roles, set their own goals for participation, and engage in self-directed forms of learning.

These kinds of identities and ways of being in the world also have the potential to serve students well in schools. As Cummins (1996) pointed out, “[t]here is a reciprocal relationship between cognitive engagement and identity investment” (p. 126). Specifically, the more that ELL students can take on powerful roles as learners and experience success with learning, “the more their academic self-concept grows, and the more academically engaged they become” (1996, p. 126). However, nonmainstream students more often receive the message that their cultural and linguistic backgrounds and prior knowledge and experiences are irrelevant to classroom activities, thus giving them little to build on as learners.

The challenge then, is thinking of ways to make our classrooms more open to what Lankshear and Knobel (2007) referred to as the “ethos stuff” of new literacies (p. 9). This might involve creating classroom environments that emphasize inquiry-based, participatory forms of learning in which students are encouraged to explore alternative interpretations of literature and classroom materials, much as they explore alternative interpretations of media through their fanfiction texts. Activities would, of course, require expert guidance by teachers; however, in keeping with the ethos of new literacies and 21st-century proficiencies, they also would involve a great deal of collaborative

learning among students and would stress the importance of accessing, evaluating, and integrating knowledge across available on- and offline sources. Such an approach presents an alternative to the “teacher as authority” model and allows students to build on their existing competencies, consider the validity of multiple perspectives, and enact powerful identities as both teachers and learners.

ELLs Can Benefit From Online Activity

While it might be tempting to dismiss youths’ online activities as leisure-time pursuits that have little relation to academic endeavors, as discussion from this article demonstrates, popular media and new technologies can provide a basis for ELL youths to develop valuable print literacy as well as 21st-century skills. As pointed out in Thorne and Black (2007), the Internet should not be viewed merely as “a proxy environment for the development of conventional L2 learning objectives such as face-to-face communication and nondigital writing” (p. 149). Instead, it is important to recognize that “Internet-mediated communication is now a high-stakes environment that pervades work, education, interpersonal communication, and, not least, intimate relationship building and maintenance” (p. 149).

As globalization and technology continue to fuel changes in modern communicative contexts, it is crucial to ensure that ELL students are not relegated to remedial language drills or positioned as passive recipients of cultural and linguistic materials presented through textbooks and lectures. Lessons based on popular culture or technology and grounded in a productive ethos have the potential to benefit ELL students in many ways. Building on activities and literacy practices that many youths are accustomed to engaging with in their leisure time can help ELL students draw from prior knowledge to contextualize and develop understandings of new language forms and content. Using new technologies for collaborative inquiry and content-creation

activities also provide options for ELLs to use language and other modes of representation for authentic communication with peers, teachers, and other experts that they may encounter in their research and explorations (e.g., community members, parents, online mentors), thus extending learning outside of the classroom walls. Such activities can provide a forum for the development of new literacies and 21st-century skills for youths who do not have ready access to computers or do not engage in such activities at home and can support ELL youths in developing identities as powerful learners, language users, and as active producers of their own social, cultural, and ideological materials.

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