

# Chapter 11

## Exploring Tools, Places, and Ways of Being: Audience Matters for Developing Writers

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter explores how writers respond to interactions with readers and audience members in two technology-mediated writing contexts: a Hunger Games fan's use of FanFiction.net and a classroom using Scholar to write original narrative texts. The authors look across the two spaces to analyze similarities in how the technology is used to foster interaction with readers and develop writers' craft through these interactions. In particular, they analyze how writing functions in each space as a tool, a place, and a way of being. By considering the affordances of these two contexts, the authors argue that technology is changing how we write and learn to write, in and out-of-school, by connecting writers with an audience that can significantly shape their goals, skills, and processes.*

### INTRODUCTION

Young people spend increasing amounts of time writing in technology-mediated spaces (Lenhart, Arafeh, Smith, & Macgill, 2008), and educational researchers continue to call for studies to theorize these practices (Alvermann, 2008; Moje, 2009). As English teacher educators and literacy researchers, we are also interested in exploring connections

between young people's writing practices in in-school and out-of-school contexts. This chapter draws on our research within technology-mediated writing spaces to consider: How is technology changing how we write? How is technology changing how we learn to write, both in and out of schools? Comparing case studies of *Hunger Games*-related writing on FanFiction.net and *Scholar*, a classroom Web-based technology for writing and peer review, we argue that these spaces leverage technology in ways that afford different

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practices and encourage developing writers to attend to audience in new ways. As we continue to investigate ways technology is changing how we write, we find it helpful to return to existing metaphors used to make sense of the Internet (Markham, 2003) and of literacy (Steinkuehler, Black, & Clinton, 2005). Drawing on case studies of two adolescent writers, we conceptualize technology-mediated writing as a tool, a place, and a way of being.

As tools, both *FanFiction.net* (FFN) and *Scholar* connect writers with an audience and they become repositories for writing. Within each space, the technology provides other tools, such as drag-and-drop functionality and Author Notes that encourage writers to engage in particular practices. Thus, these technology-mediated writing context can exemplify the tool metaphors of conduit, extension, prosthesis, and container that Markham (2003) describes. However, we remain mindful not to perpetuate an oversimplification of what happens in these writing spaces by focusing only on the tools that these technologies provide: “By absenting context, individuals, and meaning from the conceptual framework, one derives a framework for Internet technologies which unproblematically transfer knowledge from one person or place to another. As long as there is access, there will be knowledge” (p. 6). Similarly, Steinkuehler et al. (2005) reinforce this notion that an understanding of the tool must be contextualized within each space. In other words, reviews and feedback are tools that shape writing each of these contexts, but writers employ such tools differently in each context.

As places, these technology-mediated writing spaces are “sociocultural places in which meaningful human interactions occur” (Markham, 2003, p. 6). Thus, our research attends to how the culture of each context is created as we examine the interactions between writers and audience that are afforded by FFN and *Scholar*. Our focus on exchanges between participants “does not only require a sense of architecture, but also requires

a sense of presence with others” (p. 8). Yet, in defining them as places, we recognize the “fuzzy boundaries” (Steinkuehler et al., 2005, p. 98) of FFN and *Scholar*, noting that not all of the interactions with audience and all of the writing may happen solely within the technology-mediated writing space.

Finally, as ways of being, FFN and *Scholar* establish patterns and practices that fundamentally shift what it means to be a writer in these spaces. As each of the case studies will illustrate, these technology-mediated writing spaces encourage participation that is self-directed, multi-faceted, and dynamic (Lammers, Curwood, & Magnifico, 2012). Markham (2003) notes that the way of being metaphor encourages us to see that “the self’s relation to Internet technologies is much closer and one can begin to see a collapse of the distinctions that separate technology, everyday life, self, and others” (p. 9). Similarly, Steinkuehler et al. (2005) posit that technology-mediated writing spaces, when conceived of as ways of being, might collapse these distinctions as they bring the dynamics of face-to-face communication into these spaces. As fans and teachers alike incorporate these technology-mediated writing spaces into their fandom and curriculum, practices begin to change and online/offline dichotomies are blurred, if not broken down altogether.

With these metaphors in mind, we turn to articulating the theories of affinity spaces and audience that frame our research. We continue by describing FFN and *Scholar*, introducing our focal participants, and explaining the data collection and analysis procedures used for this chapter. Then, we present findings related to how each technology-mediated writing space exemplifies the tool, place, and way of being metaphors, focusing on interactions between writers and their audience. In doing so, we begin with the FFN case to demonstrate how voluntary participation in an online affinity space connects adolescents with a worldwide audience that shapes writers’ processes and practices in particular ways. We

then continue with the *Scholar* case to present an in-school instantiation of technology-mediated writing, examining how adolescents interact with an audience made up of their classmates who provide peer reviews, in line with the constraints of school and mandated participation in the space. In the final section, we discuss comparisons and unique affordances of each space, with an eye toward what this analysis contributes to the field's understanding of technology's potential to shift the relationships between writers and audiences.

## **THEORIZING AFFINITY SPACES AND AUDIENCE**

Important to our inquiry into how technology affords new audience-writer relationships in both FFN and *Scholar* is an explanation of how we conceptualize affinity spaces and how we understand the role of audience within these spaces.

### **Affinity Spaces**

We frame our understanding of these two technology-mediated writing contexts by drawing on the concept of *affinity spaces*. According to Gee (2004), these physical, virtual, and blended spaces facilitate informal learning where “newbies and masters and everyone else” interact around a “common endeavor” (p. 85). Affinity spaces spread across multiple sites, and can include in-person meeting spaces as well as online Websites and social networking tools, each serving as a *portal*, or entry point, to the space. Fan-based affinity spaces develop practices in which much of the interaction between participants involves sharing and reviewing transformative works, such as fan fiction stories, poems, videos, art, or other content related to the fandom. In our previous work (Lammers, et al., 2012), we updated Gee's concept to further define nine key features of contemporary affinity spaces:

1. A common endeavor is primary.
2. Participation is self-directed, multi-faceted, and dynamic.
3. Portals are often multimodal.
4. Affinity spaces provide a passionate, public audience for content.
5. Socializing plays an important role in affinity space participation.
6. Leadership roles vary within and among portals.
7. Knowledge is distributed across the entire affinity space.
8. Many portals place a high value on cataloguing and documenting content and practices.
9. Affinity spaces encompass a variety of media-specific and social networking portals.

Key to our understanding of affinity spaces is that they encourage participants to self-direct their interest-driven participation in the space. Affinity spaces make multiple paths of participation available and thus legitimate multiple roles within the space. Though affinity spaces support myriad passions, as literacy researchers, we are particularly interested in how they can encourage writing. Consequently, this chapter highlights how these spaces offer developing writers passionate and knowledgeable audience members who read and respond to their transformative works.

### **Audience**

Historically, research suggests that writers think about their audience in abstract ways, imagining a fictional reader and then writing with that person's imagined interests in mind (Gibson, 1950; Ong, 1975; Porter, 1996). Cognitive process studies suggest that many expert writers construct purposes, genres, and audiences to guide their writing even when these constraints are unclear (Berkenkotter, 1981; McCutchen, 2000), while others use themselves as a model audience (e.g. Elbow, 1987). Such findings have led to writing curricula in which students plan their work via pre-writing techniques

(e.g. Pressley, 2005) and read classmates' writing in small-group workshops (e.g. Atwell, 1998). Since traditional schooling and publishing often create relationships in which writers write for an audience, but rarely receive feedback directly from readers (other than evaluators like teachers or editors), several designs have sought to help students find "authentic" readers for their work. For instance, Cohen and Reil (1989) and Freedman (1992) matched students with penpals, while Purcell-Gates, Duke, and Martineau (2007) and Shaffer (2006) have created situations in which students work with and present their writing to community organizations. In all of these studies, results show that students write more successfully for real readers.

Research exploring online writers' conceptualization of audience also frames this chapter. Out of school, writers and readers of new media are no longer trapped in the one-sided relationships that are typical to schools and print media. Instead, they can become active readers, writers, and conversation partners (Magnifico, 2010). As Lunsford and Ede (2009) suggest, online writers must still consider an audience, but they now can stand "among the audience" (p. 42). Audience interactions can help writers to not only understand how their work fits into an affinity space's understandings and Discourses (Gee, 2008), but to internally reflect on their work, set new goals for themselves, and provide motivation to reconcile their ideas with their readers' reactions (Magnifico, 2010). These considerations of audience become important in the analysis of *The Hunger Games* fan fiction practices presented in this chapter.

Finally, our chapter also considers the Discourse of school, where recent movements towards accountability have led to mandated curricula, standardized assessments, and a focus on content knowledge evaluation. These tendencies lead teachers to focus on reading (Yancey, 2009), conventions and correcting errors (Dyson, 2006), as well as content-driven writings (Applebee & Langer, 2009). Thus, classrooms have maintained

an evaluation-centered "vertical" (Kalantzis & Cope, 2012), "knowledge telling" (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987) orientation to writing, with the teacher as the primary audience. However, as will become visible in this analysis, incorporating a technology-mediated writing space, such as *Scholar*, into schools has the potential to connect writers with an audience beyond the teacher.

## METHODOLOGY

We worked in the framework of descriptive case analysis (Yin, 2003), drawing case studies from a focal participant in each technology-mediated writing context. Both cases highlighted here were part of larger studies that focused on the interaction of literacy practices and technology-mediated spaces. The adolescents discussed in this chapter, Alexa and Darrell, joined their respective spaces as middle school students. Alexa was a fan of *The Hunger Games* and quickly became an avid writer on FanFiction.net during her out-of-school time; Darrell was a seventh grade student who tapped into his affinity for the *Heroes of Olympus* series to complete a school writing assignment using *Scholar*. Thus, their similar ages and fan fiction writing practices make them comparable cases. However, since these two writers had different writing skills and different ways of navigating their respective writing spaces, they present an interesting contrast. Each research context, focal participant, and the specific data collection and analysis methods employed are explained in more detail below.

## Research Contexts

### FanFiction.net

Since its founding in 1998, FanFiction.net (FFN) has become the most popular fan fiction Website, with over two million users and stories in more than 30 languages. FFN offers nine main

categories, including Anime/Magna, Books, Cartoons, Games, Comics, Movies, Plays/Musicals, Television Shows, and Miscellaneous. Once fans register for an account, they can create a profile, share their stories, review others' stories, list their favorite stories and authors, communicate via private messages, and participate in the forums. In effect, FFN blurs "any clear-cut distinction between media producer and media spectator" (Jenkins, 1992, p. 247) and provides fans with a supportive space to share their transformative works. *The Hunger Games* is a prime example of this phenomenon; by 2013, fans had written 29,753 *Hunger Games*-inspired stories and shared them on FFN. Curwood's ethnographic study of *The Hunger Games* affinity space has examined how fans use literature and popular culture as a springboard for their fan fiction stories, artworks, videos, songs, and role-playing games (Curwood, 2013a; Curwood, 2013b; Curwood, Magnifico, & Lammers, 2013). As a specific portal into *The Hunger Games* affinity space, FFN offers insight into how writers engage in this space.

In the first case study, we consider Alexa (all names are pseudonyms). At 13, she stumbled onto the world of fan fiction through an Internet search. Four years on, Alexa is an avid writer on FFN. In addition to the dozens of stories she has written, inspired by young adult literature and television shows, she also regularly reviews and offers feedback on others' writing. Alexa's online work extends to DeviantART and Tumblr, where she creates her own art and shares art that others have created based on her stories. Offline, Alexa lives in the eastern United States, is an accomplished student, and a member of her high school's Honor Society. In an interview, she shared her love for *The Crucible*, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *Great Expectations*, and her all-time favorite, *To Kill a Mockingbird*. She then added, "Surprisingly, I do not like to read. I am not a big reader at all unless I have to read something for school. As for writing, I love it - depending on what the subject is that I am writing about."

Unlike most of her writing in school, FFN allows Alexa to draw on popular culture, engage in collaborative writing, and develop her characters and plots over a sustained period. Alexa's stories are inspired by young adult literature and television shows, including *The Hunger Games*, *Harry Potter*, *Twilight*, *Glee*, *Fringe*, and *Bones*. As a writer, Alexa has found that fan fiction offers her unlimited choices in her creative writing, including the opportunity to explore new plot lines and characters' perspectives. Moreover, FFN offers her a readily available audience for her creative work. To date, Alexa's stories total over 300,000 words and have 2,900 reviews. This chapter will focus on one of Alexa's recent *Hunger Games* stories. Since Alexa's work is posted within the public domain, details of her fan fiction story are omitted in order to retain her anonymity.

## Scholar

*Scholar* (<http://learning.cgscholar.com/>) is an online, Web-browser-based workspace for writing and peer review in its fourth year of development. Currently, this tool is largely used in classrooms, but free accounts are available and individuals may use its tools and participate in professional networks. One of the authors, Alecia Magnifico, is a member of an educational research team that is partnered with *Scholar's* software development team. In this capacity, she has worked with interested teachers, observed as they implement these tools in their classrooms, analyzed data, and made design recommendations for further development. The team has studied *Scholar* throughout its development; another chapter in this volume (McCarthy, Magnifico, Woodard, & Kline, 2013), takes up the question of how students' peer review work is situated not only in *Scholar*, but within classrooms, schools, and public educational policies.

At the time of this data collection cycle, *Scholar* consisted of three major applications: Publisher, Creator, and Community. To set up *Scholar* as-

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signments, teachers use the Publisher application to enter their assignment criteria, rubrics for formative assessment, and decisions about peer review (which can include one or more peers who are anonymous or named). Then, students use the Creator application to work on their writing from home or school, save versions, check their work, write and receive peer reviews, make annotation comments, and revise in response to this feedback. Students and teachers may also interact with fellow classmates in the Community space. Similar to Edmodo and Facebook, Community allows students and teachers to send messages, share links, and post resources, sample papers, and status updates (although in this case, the teacher elected to only allow students to send messages rather than to post resources).

In the second case study, we consider Darrell, a student in Natalie Barrett's language arts class, and his narrative writing in *Scholar*. Ms. Barrett teaches at a middle school located in a small urban community near a large university in the midwestern United States, and her 7th grade class is composed of 17 students from diverse backgrounds. Darrell is an enthusiastic member of this 7th grade and was selected for this case because, while he described himself as "not a great student" and his story as a "plain story," he became very engaged in this narrative writing assignment. He loves the author Rick Riordan, whom he describes as "a beast," particularly the *Heroes of Olympus* series and its final installment, *Mark of Athena*. Darrell is impulsive, often jumping between the desks as he walks into class or bouncing off his classmates, and Ms. Barrett frequently chides him for talking out of turn. At the same time, Darrell enjoys his reading and writing. He read *Mark of Athena* during silent reading time for the duration of the narrative project and described particularly enjoying using Riordan's universe as an inspiration for his writing, working "off of" the demigod theme and "put[ting] them [the book's ideas] into connection with [his] own experiences."

Ms. Barrett envisioned the narrative project described in this paper as the closing writing project for the first quarter of the year, when the students were studying narrative works in class. She described it to her students as the first of a series of written pieces in various genres that they would write for a class magazine over the course of the school year. Students began to think through their narrative stories before classroom observation began, journaling and pre-writing in their class notebooks, as well as completing plot and character worksheets. While students were familiar with planning and drafting writing, receiving feedback from Mrs. Barrett, and revising in light of these comments, *Scholar* provided their first chance to write reviews for each other and to write and revise in an online environment. This chapter will focus on Darrell's pre-writing and writing stages during one short story.

## **Data Collection**

In each context, data collection involved systematic observation, interviews, and artifacts. Given the online nature of FFN and the in-person nature of middle school classrooms, however, these data were gathered in rather different ways. As part of Curwood's ongoing research into *The Hunger Games* affinity space, she has investigated multiple online portals and interviewed over thirty young adults from the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia. In order to understand the culture of this online affinity space, Curwood conducted systematic observation of Alexa's participation on FFN, DeviantART, and Tumblr. In addition to multiple interviews over Skype and email with Alexa, she collected artifacts, including Alexa's FFN profile, fan fiction stories, Author Notes, reviews, and private messages as well as her DeviantART artwork. As a participant-observer in the affinity space, Curwood's data collection includes four years of Alexa's current and historical transformative works and online posts.

Magnifico completed most of her data collection in person by observing in Ms. Barrett's class during seven days of the students' narrative writing project. Her observations began on the last day of pre-writing, which the students completed in their classroom, and continued in the school's computer lab as the class began to use *Scholar*. In this setting, she acted as a participant-observer, introducing *Scholar* to the students, providing technical support, and speaking informally with the students and teacher as they wrote. On each of these days, she jotted quick field notes during the class and wrote these observations up into more detailed memos immediately afterwards. On the final day of observation, students split their time in class between finishing their story writing and beginning a subsequent book project. Students who completed their stories (including Darrell) took part in 30-minute focus groups in which they reflected on their experiences with *Scholar*. These interviews were recorded and transcribed. Finally, all of the students' online writing artifacts—initiating texts, drafts, review comments, and annotations—were captured by *Scholar* and downloaded for analysis.

## **Data Analysis**

We used a thematic analysis framework (Boyatzis, 1998; Saldaña, 2009) to perform several repeated rounds of qualitative coding, gradually consolidating and refining the participants' discussions of their writing practices into several broad patterns that illustrated the tool, place, and way of being metaphors. In our analysis, we considered how young people describe their writing processes, their real and imagined audience, and how online and school-based affinity spaces supported the development of their written work. We also examined participants' writing, feedback from their readers, and subsequent revisions in order to understand how their audience actively shaped their writing process.

In addition, because *Scholar* captures drafts and peer response comments, it provides researchers with fine-grained access to students' writing and their interactions with peer reviewers—their audience members—over time. To understand Darrell's writing throughout the assignment, Magnifico employed bidirectional artifact analysis (Magnifico & Halverson, 2012) to trace Darrell's writing “backwards” (i.e. to show how later drafts reflect earlier ideas and writing) and “forwards” (i.e. to show how early drafts and feedback direct revision). This technique contextualizes Darrell's writing, reviews, and revisions, noting the textual changes he made and connecting this work with observations that capture the classroom's activity, review comments that he received, and interview transcripts that discuss his perceptions of his ongoing work. All of Darrell's reviews, annotations, and revisions were coded by type and traced to peer feedback or observations where possible.

In considering how these two technology-mediated writing contexts function as tools, places, and ways of being, we read back and forth between our data from each case and Markham's (2003) framework. The findings we present below represent our interpretation of how the metaphors map onto each case.

## **FANFICTION.NET AND SCHOLAR AS TOOLS, PLACES, AND WAYS OF BEING**

In order to gain insight into how audience shapes writers' processes and practices within various technology-mediated writing contexts, we offer case studies of two developing writers. Examining both FanFiction.net and *Scholar*, this section considers how writing and writing contexts function as tools, places, and ways of being. We begin with the FFN case, one in which writers voluntarily participate in a fan-based affinity space. We then move to the *Scholar* case, which represents mandated participation in an adapted

affinity space implemented in a classroom setting. This organization allows us to explore a developing writer's interactions with audience "in the wild" (Hutchins, 1995), and then move to consider a more constrained case. To further reinforce the impact context has on writers' interactions with audience, and vice versa, we present our analysis of each case by first discussing the metaphor of place, then tool and way of being.

## **FanFiction.net**

### **Online Writing Community as a Place**

For Alexa, her development as a writer has been profoundly shaped by her participation in primarily online "socio-cultural places in which meaningful human interactions occur" (Markham, 2003, p. 6). These places extend beyond FFN to include other portals within the affinity space, including DeviantART and Tumblr. These three portals allow Alexa to engage with multiple transformative works, modes, and semiotic resources. Moreover, they also provide access to diverse audiences. For instance, Alexa uses DeviantART as a way to share the drawings, paintings, comics, and cover art that she and other fans have created for her FFN story. One of her DeviantART followers became an avid FFN reader as a result, adding that, "If fan fiction is always like this, I will definitely be reading more!" Similarly, Alexa connects with her audience via Tumblr. Recently, one reader shared that she had been patiently waiting for the next chapter and begged Alexa to write it soon. In posting her reader's comment and her reply, Alexa alerted her Tumblr followers about the next installment in her story.

Alexa sees her online writing as qualitatively different from her writing in school. She says, "Mostly my English teacher gives us questions and we discuss the author's purpose or describe what different sorts of symbolism are present throughout the stories." In school, Alexa reads classic works of literature and analyzes how au-

thors use literary devices. But outside of school, Alexa draws inspiration from popular culture, creates compelling plot lines, and deftly applies literary devices in her own transformative works. For instance, Alexa begins one chapter with an ominous tone:

*At first I lie to myself that what happened was nothing more than a dream. That it was, in fact, a mere nightmare. That when I open my eyes and the darkness fades, I will be back within my room in the Capitol. But as consciousness envelopes me, I know that it is not the case.*

Rather than simply being a consumer, Alexa's writing community encourages her to be a producer and an innovator. In school, she often has a limited audience; namely, her teacher. But online, Alexa has a wide audience who interacts with her by providing reviews and formative feedback, thereby motivating her to continue writing.

Alexa's writing community offers her a global audience, including eager reviewers and beta readers. Not only does FFN allow for asynchronous communication between writers and their audience, it also gives writers ample time to develop their craft. When Alexa first joined FFN, she wrote a number of stories about *Bones* and *Twilight*. Over the past four years, she began to explore new genres, characters, and themes. Today, Alexa is a dedicated writer. She shares, "I write fan fiction like nobody's business. I love it so much." Her interests and ideas—not external deadlines or high-stakes assessments—drive her writing. Moreover, Alexa's writing community includes fuzzy boundaries (Steinkuehler et al., 2005) and multiple portals. By posting her transformative works on FFN, DeviantART, and Tumblr, she shares her work in the public domain. As a place, Alexa's writing community is defined by the meaningful interactions she has in these multiple spaces and the keen sense of presence with her audience.

## Author Notes as a Tool

As a writer, Alexa has been able to spend the past four years developing her craft as part of an online affinity space. In her profiles on FFN, DeviantART, and Tumblr, Alexa identifies herself as a writer, first and foremost. She uses all three portals as a way to interact with her audience. For instance, she includes links to her Tumblr on her FFN stories and she shares her own and others' fan art for her stories on DeviantART, thus these links become conduits (Markham, 2003) connecting Alexa's writing across the multiple portals. One of the primary tools that Alexa uses to interact with her audience is through her Author Notes, which Black (2008) has noted as a core feature of the fan fiction genre. Over the past ten months, Alexa has been writing a story about an unlikely romance between two *Hunger Games* characters. At 112,373 words long, each of the story's 30 chapters includes Author Notes at the beginning and end.

Author Notes serve multiple purposes for Alexa: they allow her to respond to readers' previous chapter reviews, anticipate readers' reactions to the current chapter, express appreciation to certain reviewers, and address any possible issues with her writing, such as proofreading issues or writer's block. As a tool, Author Notes connect Alexa with her audience. At the beginning of this particular story, her chapters generally included disclaimers ("I'm doing my best to keep them in character") and requests ("Please review, favorite, and author alert! It keeps me motivated"). Alexa uses Author Notes as a way to address her choices as a writer; for instance, she may have drawn attention to the chapter's suspenseful ending or explained why she depicted characters in certain ways. At other times, Alexa's Author Notes double as an apology for her perceived shortcoming as a writer and promises to proofread her chapter soon.

As her following has grown, Alexa's Author Notes have become more detailed and specifically respond to reviews. In general, reviewers offer Alexa positive feedback, including compliments

on her characterization ("Your portrayal of the characters is outstanding!") and plot development ("I'm in love with the relationship between [the two main characters]. So thank you, for actually taking it slow. Their progress is gradual, and such a joy to read") as well as her attention to the original work, *The Hunger Games* ("Your story is really well-written and I love how you managed to stick to the canon in so many details"). Some reviewers request specific topics for Alexa to explore in future chapters; consequently, her Author Notes explain why she did (or did not) take incorporate readers' suggestions. As they bridge physical and virtual spaces and create a means for answering back to reviewers, Author Notes can be seen as a tool FFN writers like Alexa use in order to engage in a dialogue with their audience.

## Writing as a Way of Being

Alexa has engaged in the online affinity space associated with *The Hunger Games* as a reader, a writer, a reviewer, and an artist. Alexa's identity as a writer shapes the way she sees herself and the world around her, and her participation on FFN has been integral to her development. This way of being is validated by others as Alexa is recognized within the affinity space as an accomplished writer. In one interview, she said, "I think I'm a rather well-known author on FFN. I'll go onto other sites and I'll have people say, 'Oh hey! You're the one who wrote [story title]. I love that story!' And I'll be like, 'Really?! Thank you!'" Alexa's acquisition of her ways of being as a writer did not happen overnight. Rather, through actively participating in FFN, Alexa developed her ability to craft believable characters and compelling storylines. Moreover, her development of a writerly Discourse was facilitated by her interaction with hundreds of reviewers as well as a few specific beta readers.

Mid-way through her story, a reviewer named Hope pointed out the value of beta readers who serve as peer reviewers, "I am so excited for the upcoming chapters. Me. Want. Have you ever

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thought about getting a beta?... Once they proof-read [your story], they send it back and it's ready for posting! I would actually love to beta for you, if you wanted a beta." Alexa quickly took Hope up on her offer and they have since forged a close relationship, without making distinctions between friendship and collaboration. Before Alexa posts her chapters online, she always sends them to Hope for review.

In one exchange, Hope's feedback to Alexa focused on her writing style and punctuation:

*8th paragraph: Combine the first two sentences and make it "I chew on the inside of my cheek at the truth of his words." Take off the of at the end of the fourth sentence to make it "... I am unsure." Fifth sentence try to change it to something more like "Just like I am kept in the dark as to what's going on, shadows grow between him and me." (beautiful comparison, btw)*

*13th paragraph: Take off the question mark at the last sentence.*

*14th paragraph: Take out the comma after "I ask" and put a period in its place.*

*15th paragraph: Place a comma instead of a period after "Can't" and lowercase "he." Take out the apostrophe on the word "yours." Yours is already possessive. It doesn't need an apostrophe.*

*16th paragraph: Instead of chopping up her urges into separate sentences, make them one. "The urge to cry, to slap, to release my emotions somehow, builds until I feel I may burst."*

*Great job so far! Loving the tension between [the two characters]!*

While reviews are publicly posted, beta readers share their comments through FFN's private message system. As a writer, this allows Alexa to have an initial audience of one who edits her story and offers constructive criticism. Recently, Alexa

and Hope established a joint account where they write alternating chapters based on two characters in *The Hunger Games* trilogy, collapsing distinctions between the two as writers. This collaborative project illustrates how participating in FFN encourages Alexa to see writing as something other than a solitary way of being, thus shaping her identity, her practices, and her relationships with others within the writing community.

## Scholar

### Classrooms as Writing Places

While *Scholar* aims to support classrooms as writing communities in which students help each other by formatively reviewing each others' drafts—similar to interactions in online affinity spaces—the socio-cultural contexts of classrooms construct writing places quite differently. Perhaps the key difference between most classrooms and most affinity spaces is the nature of participation itself. In online writing communities and affinity spaces, participation is often voluntary and "horizontal" (i.e. many writers comment freely on each others' work, see Kalantzis & Cope, 2012). Few operate under the premise that members must participate, and fewer still dictate the steps and terms of participation. In classrooms, however, students are required to complete certain assignments and they must complete them in certain ways.

While working on Ms. Barrett's narrative project, Darrell and his classmates were free to choose school-appropriate story topics, and many students started several narratives as they worked through their initial journaling and pre-writing worksheets. At the same time, *Scholar* and their teacher dictated their writing process. *Scholar's* architecture guided writers through the specific steps of drafting a story: submitting first drafts, reviewing and annotating each others' work, and revising with that feedback in mind. Failing to complete these activities on time would lead to a lower grade, a significant penalty since this

narrative represented the class's first substantial writing project grade for the year.

Introducing *Scholar* to the classroom created a hybrid environment that had more-directive features of the classroom (e.g. rubric-centered reviews) and more-open features of a writing affinity space (e.g. sending messages to classmates in Community). Ms. Barrett remained a central presence in the classroom in many ways: she set assignments, created assessment guidelines, and circulated through the computer lab to answer questions and help students manage their writing. Review and annotation interactions in *Scholar* opened up the typical discourse among students, however, allowing Darrell and his classmates to meaningfully interact with each others' work by reading, providing help, and sharing ideas in ways that would be impossible if Ms. Barrett was their sole reader. For instance, Darrell described the reviews becoming "a circle of help" because the reviews that he received "g[ave] [me] a starting point on what to look out for in someone else's story." *Scholar's* online writing place broadened students' audience, allowing them to communicate ideas with their reviews and put writing lessons into practice, while Ms. Barrett opened up the classroom to students' narrative expression by assigning an open-ended story.

### Scholar as a Writing Tool

Darrell was one of the few students who reported writing at home and thus *Scholar* became a tool for expanding the classroom and allowing interactions with his parents as readers. Most significantly, he experienced some data loss in the first draft of his story, *The Life of Jason Grace: the life of a demigod* [sic], when the computer that he was using in the lab classroom disconnected from the network. He was understandably upset at the time, but the next morning, Darrell bounded into class and reported that he had used *Scholar* to re-draft his story and asked his parents for a read-through: "Guess what! I got home last night, and I rewrote my story, and my parents helped me, and now it's way longer

and better. And I was scared it'd erase, so I saved like seven times!" Darrell's work logs in *Scholar* back up this description of his actions. Between draft 4 (saved after school) and draft 7 (saved in class the next day), Darrell re-drafted his story and copyedited his work. In the first paragraph of his story alone, Darrell made 17 large and small edits, including 14 corrections to conventions (e.g. correcting spelling) and three reorganizations (e.g. reorganizing run-on sentences into smaller sentences). The two remaining paragraphs share similar errors and corrections. While draft 4 includes many misspellings, capitalization errors, and run-on sentences, draft 7 transforms his sentences into more conventional English. This editing work confirms Darrell's report of working on his story and asking his parents for proofreading help, and it demonstrates how *Scholar* was a tool that connected him to his writing from home.

In this way, the "anywhere, anyplace" capability of *Scholar* aided Darrell. When an online tool can expand the classroom beyond its traditional place within the school walls, new opportunities and interactions become possible for students. Not only did Darrell ask his parents to become his readers, he used their ideas in the very document that he would eventually turn in for peer review and teacher evaluation. *Scholar* organizes work and provides access to audiences and readers (in this case, Darrell's parents) that might and offer help in multiple ways and at multiple times.

### Reviewing as a Way of Being

Following his significant self-revision, the class began work on peer reviewing each other's stories. As a reviewer, Darrell provided feedback on three classmates' stories, mostly making informative (e.g. "i know the charecter know and how i can relate to her"<sup>1</sup>) and praising comments (e.g. "great thought good storie strong conflicts of charecters") in his reviews. Additionally, he annotated two of these stories extensively to correct various small errors. For example, he commented "5.4?????????????" on one classmate's phrase

## **Exploring Tools, Places, and Ways of Being**

“5.4 brothers.” On another classmate’s story, he noted spacing errors, “I asked – space it.” Darrell worked carefully on reading, annotating, and reviewing until day 6 of the project, the day before Ms. Barrett had planned for the students to finish and submit the final drafts of their stories.

Between his last two drafts—draft 7 and draft 9—Darrell did not revise significantly, possibly as a result of the time he spent reviewing others’ work rather than revising his own. At the same time, he changed small details. For instance, Darrell added setting details such as the “small town of Norrisville,” included his character’s name, and reorganized to provide information about his main character’s motivations to run away. All of these revisions responded directly to review comments from his classmates, suggesting that Darrell began to see responding to reviews as a part of the writing process—something that writers do. Comments about setting, in fact, were key features of his reviews, since he received three suggestions about his (lack of) setting. For example, his classmate Kea writes “I didn’t really get a really good idea of the setting as i was reading. I think that you should [add] the setting a little bit in between some words so i can imagine the setting.”

These comments made it clear that missing setting information has consequences—Darrell’s readers were not sure where his story happened. Similarly, his classmate Isaac explained his confusion with the beginning of the story, noting that the audience does not yet know Jason is a demigod. Facts and backstories must be explained to make the story make sense. Darrell appreciated the feedback that he got and the review process in general:

*I really liked the fact that we were able to share stories with other people because we were able to get some input from other people... most of them were good comments but they were also very helpful.*

What is interesting, however, is that he and several classmates reported wide-ranging conse-

quences as a result of their reading and reviewing. While students largely focused on this mutual help, they also reported thinking more metacognitively about editing and writing as a result of their reading. In the focus group, Darrell pointed out that his classmates’ reviews helped him consider writing and reviewing as reciprocal, connected processes as he was reading their narratives:

*When you see how this person’s reviewing your story that also gives you a starting point on what to look out for in someone else’s story... When they reviewed on my story, it gave me a starting point of what to think of while I read theirs.*

Reading, in other words, feeds back into writing and reviewing, collapsing distinctions between the tasks of becoming a writer.

Students learned about each other by reading each other’s writing, too, “like, where this person is coming from.” Darrell noted, for instance, that he learned that a classmate “probably has a very wide span of imagination” by reading his humorous story about a baby penguin who travels to Jamaica. Whereas the students complained at first about having to review each others’ stories—it was, after all, a whole extra step beyond their usual writing classwork—many found themselves excited to not only help each other, but to share personal insights that had, up until the reviews, been inaccessible.

## **FINAL THOUGHTS**

Having presented data from the two case studies of developing writers, each working within a different technology-mediated writing context, we now turn our attention to discussing comparisons between and unique affordances of each space. Specifically, we consider how this analysis contributes to the field’s understanding of technology’s potential to shift the relationships between writers and audiences. In each context, we see that writers are encouraged to engage with and respond to

feedback from their audience. Alexa had the assistance of a beta reader, who provided editorial suggestions for unpublished drafts, and readers who posted reviews on published chapters. She used the practice of including Author Notes as a tool for responding to audience feedback. Darrell received feedback from his parents and through peer reviews in the Creator tool in *Scholar*, and responded by making changes to his drafts. Additionally, for both Alexa and Darrell, writing took on a new way of being within these technology-mediated spaces. For Alexa, the FFN practice of having beta readers allowed her to see writing not as a solitary activity, but as a collaborative way of being. *Scholar* fostered the importance of review and revision as parts of the writing process, and allowed Darrell the opportunity to see writing as a way of getting to know his classmates in a different light.

The analysis also reveals important differences between these spaces. Though *Scholar* begins to create classroom writing spaces by providing tools that foster writerly practices of annotating, seeking feedback, and revising, that this technology-mediated writing context remains influenced by the Discourse of school cannot be ignored. *Scholar* shifts classrooms towards greater participation and collaboration by allowing students to serve as each other's readers, and its review elements are similar to those experienced by Alexa in FFN. At the same time, Ms. Barrett dictated Darrell's writing assignment and assessment, and chose to curb students' posting of information in *Scholar*'s Community application. While these limitations make sense given school norms and parent expectations, as a result, the *Scholar*-mediated writing place remains necessarily hybrid, not as truly horizontal or interest-driven as FFN. We also see how the context affects each writer's development of a way of being. Alexa was able to take on the identity of a writer in *The Hunger Games* affinity space because FFN gave her the freedom to pursue the plots and characters in which she was most interested whenever she wanted to write. The mandated, time-limited, rubric-driven nature of

classroom writing, on the other hand, necessarily hindered Darrell's ability to adopt a writerly way of being, even though Ms. Barrett did allow her students free choice in several areas including narrative topic and form. Therefore, while technologies allow students to realize that they, too, sit "among the audience" (Lunsford & Ede, 2009), *Scholar* also remains committed to school.

Assessment was another important difference between these spaces. Ms. Barrett assessed Darrell's writing as a portion of his English grade, whereas Alexa's writing was assessed by reader reviews. The teacher's control of the writing context stands in stark contrast to the open, communicative writing observed in online affinity spaces. While adherence to genres, forms, and language conventions is a key skill for writers in both of these settings—and we observe both Alexa and Darrell attending to their own and others' writing in these ways—writing takes on different significance in spaces where creation for passionate online audiences is the central activity (Curwood, et al., 2013; Magnifico & Halverson, 2012). Alexa writes for enjoyment and to express her fandom of *The Hunger Games*. Darrell, though he similarly takes inspiration from popular culture in writing his demigod narrative, is writing to complete a school assignment.

We see potential for the design of affinity spaces to filter into school-based reading and writing, however. The Common Core State Standards conceptualize multi-genre writing, multimedia creation, ongoing collaboration, and peer review as valuable skills (NGA Center & CCSSO, 2010). However, the extent to which the assessments that follow from these standards enact these values remains to be seen. Educational technologies such as *Scholar* bring online content creation and peer review to classrooms, aiming to shift discourse patterns from a teacher-centered "vertical" to a more peer-to-peer "horizontal" framework (Kalantzis & Cope, 2012), much like Alexa's experience of working with reviewers and beta readers in FFN. Additionally, the technology affords students the opportunity to work beyond school walls, allowing

Darrell's parents to provide formative feedback on his draft as he worked from home. In this way, Darrell's work in *Scholar* supports Warschauer's (2006) findings that when students had daily access to Internet-connected laptops, they demonstrated increased levels of composition, revision, and publication, and they received greater feedback on their writing.

Finally, this analysis demonstrates how metaphors shape our perceptions, providing us different ways to think about writing. In contrast to thinking about writing as evaluation or writing as private self-reflection, these cases illustrate that writing can be public and collaborative, encouraging formative feedback from readers in the audience. Thus, these technology-mediated writing spaces afford different kinds of practices and create new writing cultures. By making the implicit writing relationship between author and audience more explicit, these spaces shift the culture of writing. While this may be more evident in online affinity spaces (see also Lammers, 2013), with the inclusion of *Scholar* in classrooms, we see the potential for a similar cultural shift in schools, too. This analysis begins to consider how *learning* to write is changing, and the next steps should include further research into how technology-mediated writing contexts can be used to *teach* writing in new ways.

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## KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

**Affinity Space:** Physical, virtual, or blended sites of informal learning where interested participants gather for a common endeavor (see Lammers, Curwood, & Magnifico, 2012).

**Beta Reader:** Proofreader and/or copyeditor within a fan fiction space (see Black, 2008).

**Communicative Writing:** Writing intended as an interaction with readers, rather than for the purpose of self-reflection or evaluation.

**Discourse:** A socially-situated way of being in the world that encompasses not only language, but also behavior, interactions, values, and beliefs, to construct an identity as a certain kind of person that is recognized by others within a particular group (see Gee, 2008).

**Fan Fiction:** Fictional texts created by fans, derived from their fandom of a particular media such as a television show, movie, book, anime or manga series, or videogame, often to engage with or extend particular characters or storylines (see Black, 2008; Jenkins, 1992).

**Peer Review:** A process of evaluating work, in this case writing, that is conducted by one's peers.

**Portal:** An entry point into an affinity space (i.e. an online discussion board, a face-to-face gathering, a social networking site) that generates content related to the common endeavor.

**Transformative Work:** A creation that takes an existing text/media and turns it into something new, such as fan fiction, art, music, or videos (see <http://transformativeworks.org/>).

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> All quotations that refer to reviews are reproduced exactly as Darrell and his classmates wrote their reviews on each other's work.