

## **Engaging fan cultures: What students learn when they study fans**

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### **Abstract:**

This essay describes a fan-based pedagogy and the learning outcomes it produced among college students. We focus on a fandom assignment given in an 'Introduction to American Popular Culture' course in an American Studies department at a large state university. The assignment required students to conduct a study of a fan community of their choice. Students developed and administered questionnaires, conducted interviews, and wrote essays describing and interpreting their findings. They were required to include a reflective paragraph discussing what they learned about fandom as a result of their research. Using content analysis, we coded 135 essays from four sections of the class to identify how students spoke about what they learned. Students reported acquiring a deeper understanding of the role of fandom in constructing identity and community. In addition, many questioned and changed their preconceptions about fans and fan behavior. A number also noted that they acquired an appreciation for the theories and methods of academic fan studies. A majority of students indicated that studying fandom resulted in greater self-awareness and awareness of others. We make the case that learning and applying the methods of fan studies prepares students to engage the world outside the classroom with a more critical and reflective lens.

**Keywords:** fandom, pedagogy, teaching, learning

### **Introduction**

'I now understand there is more to being a fan than just dressing up or collecting things.'  
--Student who conducted research on *Star Wars* fans

Increasingly, fandom has become a topic of study in college and university classrooms. While fan studies has been a recognized field of academic inquiry for some time now, fandom is also becoming a pedagogical practice in its own right. In addition to asking what we can learn from studying fans, fan scholars are ‘reassessing what we do in the classroom’ and asking what students can learn when they study fandom (Larsen and Zubernis 3). Some instructors, for example, incorporate students’ own fandom into the curriculum to spark their interest and teach media literacy (Alvermann and Hagood; Gerde and Foster; Alvermann and Xu; Devries). Others teach theories of audience reception as well as the history of fan studies in order to introduce students to fandom as an academic field (Gutierrez; Geraghty). Still others have used content created by fans to teach students how to evaluate and critique primary texts (Black; Winters; Farley). Some teachers have students engage actively in creative audience practices – composing fan fiction or adaptations, for instance – as a way of developing writing proficiency, creative thinking, and cultural literacy (Alvermann; Jessop; Smol; Booth 2012). These various approaches suggest that fandom can engage students on multiple levels and teach them a range of practical skills and critical mindsets. The recently published essay collection *Fandom as Classroom Practice* makes the case that a fan-based ‘remix pedagogy’ can encourage playful learning that ‘creates space for self-positioning, self-identification, and experimentation that leads to new knowledge and interpretations’ (Howell 9). Teaching fandom, of course, can also reaffirm the significance of the audience as an object of inquiry. As Paul Booth observes, ‘Putting fandom to use in our classrooms not only valorizes the fan, but also valorizes the practices of fandom’ (2010, para. 4).

The pedagogy we describe in this essay similarly puts fandom to use in the classroom, but we are primarily interested in what students can learn when they conduct their own studies of fan communities. In addition to bringing fan cultures and practices into the curriculum, we also send students out into the world to research fandom for themselves. The final project for students in our ‘Introduction to American Popular Culture’ class is to study a fan community.<sup>1</sup> Students are required to find three fans of the same phenomenon, administer a questionnaire of their own design, conduct follow-up interviews, and write a paper that describes and analyzes the meaning of fandom for their informants. One of our goals with this activity is to incorporate community into the curriculum, to emphasize ‘literacy as a social activity, encompassing not simply reading and writing but inquiry, research, interaction, and communication with real audiences’ (Linkon 230). What do students learn from this direct engagement with fan communities? What do they come to understand about identity, community, diversity, and themselves as a result of this project? How do their preconceptions about fans and fan behavior change, if at all? To answer these questions, this essay outlines a fan-based pedagogy and offers a content analysis of the work students produced in response to this teaching practice. Our analysis of 135 student fandom studies affirmed our stated learning outcomes for our popular culture course, but also revealed unanticipated outcomes. These outcomes were heartening on

many levels, but they also suggested the need to refine our pedagogy, especially with regards to teaching students about fandom and diversity. Ultimately, in what follows, we argue that students gain a greater appreciation for the value of fan communities and a deeper understanding of themselves when they learn how to study fandom.

### **Pedagogy: Teaching Students How to Study Fans**

American Studies 300, 'Introduction to American Popular Culture,' is a General Education (G.E.) course taught at a large state university in Southern California. The course is designed to introduce students to the history of U.S. popular culture while providing them with various theories and methods for analyzing it. Undergraduates can take the course to meet the university's 'explorations in the social sciences' G.E. requirement. The course enrolls fifty to sixty students per section from a variety of majors, and the class demographics tend to reflect the campus in general: our institution is 40.8% Hispanic/Latino, 25.3% White, 20.4% International 7.8%, Asian, 4.2% Multi-race, 2% Black, .2% Pacific Islander, and .1% American Indian. A high percentage of students are the first in their family to attend college, and an overwhelming majority of them commute to campus. Typically, very few declared American Studies majors are in AMST 300; many of them discover the major by taking G.E. classes such as this one, and then declare or change their major to American Studies soon thereafter.

Over the course of the semester, AMST 300 provides students with an interdisciplinary framework for thinking about the production, reception, and significance of U.S. popular culture. At our university, American Studies is its own department, and its focus is the interdisciplinary study of culture, history, and everyday life. As a field, American Studies 'aims to understand the multiplicity of the social and cultural lives of people in – and in relation to – the United States, both past and present' (Deloria and Olson 6). AMST 300 converges on popular culture as a way of understanding this 'multiplicity' of lives. Topics covered vary depending on the instructor (some fifteen different sections are taught each semester), but our course focuses on subjects such as blackface minstrelsy, amusement parks, Buffalo Bill, dance, basketball, jazz, baseball, Film Noir, television, and zombies. Major themes in the course include the role of leisure in everyday life; race, gender, sexuality, and popular culture; class and taste; technology and popular culture; 'cool' as an aesthetic; and popular culture as a site of protest and resistance. While most of the semester is spent surveying the history of various popular forms, the last four weeks are focused on contemporary American culture as understood through the lens of fandom. Students read a book-length ethnographic study and watch a documentary about fandom while designing and implementing their own audience research project.

Teaching fandom in an American Studies context helps us reinforce the idea that culture is a contested space, or a 'battlefield,' in Stuart Hall's formulation, where the 'people' and the 'power bloc' often struggle for representation and influence. We want our students to understand that the study of U.S. popular culture is not just about looking at the origins and growth of the mass culture industry, nor is it just about doing close readings of

the content, artifacts, and rituals that the industry has produced over time. In American Studies, we are also interested in the *cultural work* of popular culture – what it *does* out in the world – and this requires us to examine how audiences have negotiated, resisted, and remixed what they consume, in the past and in the present. In American Studies, we want to understand how popular culture shapes our personal, social, and national identity. We want to understand what popular culture means to everyday people, and how they have responded to popular culture in meaningful ways. As an interdisciplinary field that is interested in culture and its meaning, American Studies scholarship integrates various theories and methods in trying to understand audiences, drawing on British cultural studies, cultural anthropology, reader response criticism, and concepts such as Benedict Anderson’s ‘imagined community,’ to name a few. Work like Janice Radway’s *Reading the Romance*, Erika Doss’s *Elvis Culture*, Michael Denning’s *Mechanic Accents*, Lawrence Levine’s *Highbrow Lowbrow*, Catherine Davidson’s *Revolution and the Word*, Henry Jenkins’s *Textual Poachers*, and Ien Ang’s *Watching Dallas* are just a few examples of scholarship on audiences, reception, and struggles over cultural meaning that exemplify an American Studies approach, and which inform our teaching in AMST 300.

The main text we use to teach the principles of fan study is Daniel Cavicchi’s *Tramps Like Us: Music and Meaning Among Springsteen Fans* (1998). Cavicchi’s goal with his insider’s narrative (Cavicchi is a Bruce fan himself) is to understand ‘the ways in which people form special, sustained attachments to musical performers or genres’ (vi). Using ethnographic methods, Cavicchi focuses on the voices and behaviors of fans themselves: his book is a study of ‘what they do, how they talk about what they do, and finally why they do it’ (vi). Cavicchi finds informants by placing ads in Springsteen fanzines, interviewing fans he knows within his own network, and by approaching fans at shows. His methodology involves administering surveys (he received forty-eight complete questionnaires) and conducting follow up interviews with selected fans. In the final analysis, Cavicchi makes the case that fans use their love of Springsteen to ‘release tension, reaffirm values, create a sense of self, and meet others’ (10). We find *Tramps Like Us* to be a particularly useful model in an American Studies course, because the book originated as Cavicchi’s American Studies dissertation at Brown University, and therefore the language and terminology he uses, as well as his convergence on questions of identity, community, context, and cultural work, tend to match up nicely with the themes and concepts we explore throughout the semester.

As we discuss *Tramps Like Us* in class, we give students opportunities to reflect on their own fandom and the fandom of people they know. We ask if they themselves are fans of anything and how they express their fandom. We ask if their fandom has changed over time. We ask them to consider if other people in their life have ever judged their audience participation negatively. We ask students to think about how fandom has shaped their sense of who they are, and whether it has influenced the construction of their social worlds. These discussions help activate students’ prior knowledge of fandom and allow us to ‘start from a position of familiarity and work towards the unfamiliar’ (Geraghty 171). In our case, the ‘unfamiliar’ involves teaching students the scholarly methods for studying fandom.

Such conversations also help us explore the ethical dimensions of fan research with our students. Discussing the researcher's relative biases and challenges as either insider or outsider to the fan subculture; reflecting on students' own experiences with having been judged for their popular culture consumption; and reinforcing the methodological importance of listening to fans are all of signal importance in trying to help prepare students to study and understand audience and reception. Building this dialogue into any unit on fandom is especially important given some of the lessons learned from previous interactions between academics and fandom communities, most notably the controversy surrounding the 2015 'Theory of Fan Fiction' course at University of California, Berkeley that had students sharply critique online fan fiction without adherence to the norms of those particular fan communities (Baker-Whitelaw 2015).

In addition to assigning Cavicchi's book, we screen the documentary *Trekkies* (1997) in class. *Trekkies* is an examination of Star Trek fandom that combines fan interviews with footage from conventions. It introduces fans who collect memorabilia, decorate their homes and offices, join local clubs, and dress up as *Star Trek* characters. The film is especially useful for getting students to think about their preconceptions of fans. On the one hand, it celebrates and affirms Trekkies by showing how *Star Trek* can create community and instill values and morals. On the other hand, the documentary profiles informants who reinforce the Trekkie stereotype (e.g., the grown man who dresses in a Starfleet uniform to go grocery shopping; the socially awkward teenager who creates Star Trek graphics on his computer). Pairing *Trekkies* with Cavicchi's book challenges students to think about the differences and similarities among fandoms, as well as the varied levels of social acceptance that people may experience depending on their fandom. *Trekkies* also helpfully illustrates many of the concepts Cavicchi discusses in his book, such as 'degrees of fandom' (debates over who is a 'real' fan); 'associations' (the basis of a fan's connection to their object of affection, such as personal, aesthetic, political, and so forth); 'becoming a fan' narratives; and the relationship between collecting and identity formation. In effect, students get to practice applying Cavicchi's methods and concepts to the testimony and behavior of Star Trek fans they observe in the documentary.

The culminating assignment for this final unit is for students to find three fans of the same popular culture phenomenon and conduct a fandom study of their own. For the purposes of this project, we put some parameters on what 'fan' means: there needs to be an element of organized, public performance and consumption in the fandom (we don't want papers about people who are 'fans' of napping or sneakers, for example). We lay out a clear methodological process for students to follow. They must first design a survey of at least twenty questions that will be administered to their fans. We look at the survey Cavicchi uses, which is reproduced in his Appendix, and spend class time brainstorming possible questions. Typical survey questions include things like, how did you become a fan? How long have you been a fan? Do you collect? How do you participate in your fandom? Students might also ask informants about 'favorites,' the difference between a 'real' fan and a casual fan, and how many hours – or dollars – they spend on average on their fandom. In

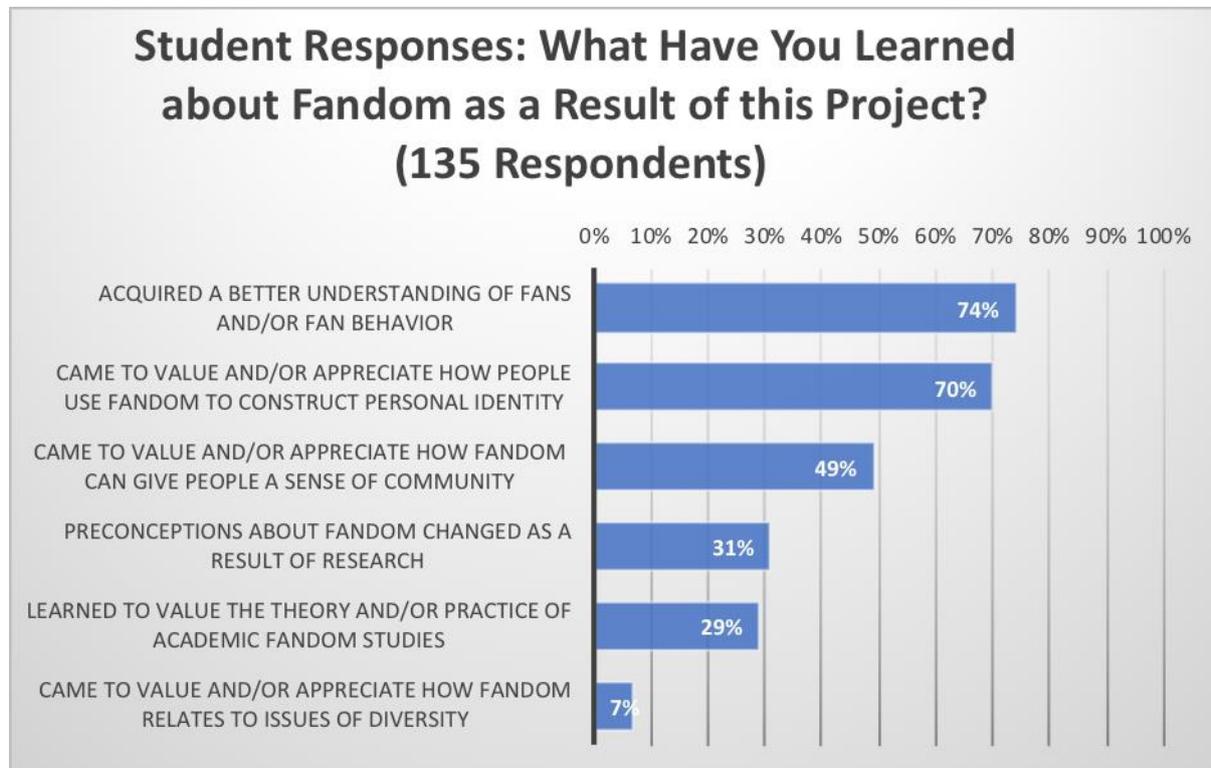
addition, they must gather demographic information: the informant's age, work, level of education, marital status, where they live, and so forth. After they've had three informants complete the surveys, students read the responses and generate follow up questions. Then students conduct interviews with their informants to have them clarify and elaborate on their survey answers. Students must conduct these follow up interviews either face to face, via video conference, or by phone, though we encourage them to have in-person conversations.

We decided to ask students to focus on three fans primarily due to time constraints – the fandom paper was one assignment in a short unit within a larger course that is not exclusively focused on fan studies – and because the students in AMST 300 are overwhelmingly non-American Studies majors who are new to pop culture research methods. We found that even in limiting students to three interviews and giving them a suggested paper length of eight-to-ten pages, many of them still went over the required page limit as they attempted to capture and analyze the fan behavior of their three informants.

For the actual paper, students are required to summarize Cavicchi's argument about Springsteen fandom, describe his methodology, and discuss the results of their own study. We ask them to describe the object of fandom (offer some background information on the subject of their study) and provide background information on their informants. Then, they must describe the fan behavior of each informant and integrate quotations from their surveys and interviews. We asked students to identify patterns, similarities, and differences among the three fans they interviewed. We also ask them to apply, as relevant, some of Cavicchi's concepts that we have read about and practiced with *Trekkies*. Along with their final paper, they must include a blank copy of the questionnaires they designed. We should make clear that we require students to change the names of their informants to pseudonyms in their papers, and we stress the fact that their papers are only being read by the instructor and will not be made public or published.

In our instructions for the fandom assignment, we tell students to include 'a conclusion in which you discuss what you have learned about fandom as a result of this project.' We want to provide students an opportunity to engage in critical reflection about their work. Booth observes that 'critically examining the self (and self-interest) becomes the first foray into the study of aca-fandom' (2012, 175). Student responses to this particular prompt form the basis for our current study. We reviewed the concluding paragraphs of 135 papers that students wrote for four sections of AMST 300 taught in Fall 2012 and Spring 2013. We paid careful attention to the ways in which students articulated what they learned about fandom in general and what they learned about the academic study of fandom and its application. After reading a random sample of twenty-five papers, we identified themes and patterns that emerged in the ways students talked about their learning. Then, we formulated six coding categories, each one corresponding to a different learning outcome as described by the students themselves. We generated a precise definition of each category and then conducted a content analysis of all 135 concluding paragraphs, looking for

language, phrases, and words that might correspond to one or more categories. For each category, students were either given a '1' if they talked about that outcome, or a '0' if they did not. We tallied the frequency of responses in each category and analyzed the results. The six categories of learning outcomes we used to code student responses were Understanding, Preconception, Identity, Community, Value, and Diversity.



### Outcomes: Identity, Community, and Changing Preconceptions

74% of students communicated that they acquired a better understanding of fans and/or fan behavior as a result of their research. In their conclusions, these students indicated that their project had somehow deepened their awareness of not only what fans do, but why they do it. 'I've realized how common fandom really is and how incorrect the stereotypes are,' wrote one student who studied fans of the L.A. Lakers, adding, 'Fans are everyday people who have found a connection to something they love.' Another student wrote of Star Trek fans, 'They are not the extremists that are displayed in media... These people do live 'normal' lives that are simply enhanced by their love of *Star Trek*.' A student who looked at fans of World of Warcraft concluded, 'I have learned that it is always wrong to judge someone from the outside. Being a fan of something should never make anyone an outcast.' A student who studied Raiders football fans wrote, 'Those who see fans as passive sheep in a consumer culture or rebels trying to create a counterculture seem to miss the point that fandom is a culture of its own ...To overlook fandom would be to overlook a big part of what it is to be human.' These responses suggest that studying fandom helps students develop empathy and respect for others. Cognitive psychologist Howard Gardner talks about the

importance of cultivating a ‘respectful mind’ in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. A respectful mind ‘notes and welcomes differences between human individuals and human groups, tries to understand these “others”’ (3). Three quarters of our students reported that through their engagement with fans, they developed a better understanding of people outside of themselves. As a result of this assignment, they came to ‘value those who belong to other cohorts’ (Gardner 107). Paul Booth has made the point that ‘teaching and learning about fans and fan groups means breaking away from an ‘us vs. them’ dichotomy, and seeing fans instead as participants in their own culture’ (2012, 184). It was clear to us that requiring students to study fans greatly augmented whatever prior knowledge they had about fandom. And for some of them, the fandom study also compelled them to confront their prior assumptions.

31% of students stated that their preconceptions about fandom – stereotypes, judgments, biases – changed as a result of their research. In their essay conclusion, these students talk honestly about how their projects challenged some of their long-held notions. ‘Before this project, I had the stereotypical image of a fan, one that is absolutely crazed with the artist and is beyond obsessed with them,’ wrote one student, who studied fans of recording artist Trey Songz. She continued: ‘But now I see fandom more positively, especially if it’s encouraging fans to unite for a greater good ... I always thought fans were ridiculous and this project helped me understand the positive aspect of fandom, which I never thought would happen.’ Another student admitted, ‘As a Ducks fan myself, I held preconceived notions on what it meant to be a fan of the team, and that view was challenged.’ Another student who talked to fans of Disney remarked, ‘I used to believe most of the negative stereotypes about fans. However, after having my interviewees talk about the reasons why they are fans... those views changed.’ A student who wrote about the L.A. Lakers made a similar point in noting, ‘I learned not to put a label on certain fans due to what society says... because there is definitely more to it than we think.’ Echoing such comments was a student who studied Justin Bieber fans and wrote, ‘I realized these extreme fans are just simply average people who invest a larger part of their identity into something they feel a connection with.’ These comments reflect the ways in which students were able to rethink their positions on fans and fan behavior, leaving them with reformed opinions and frameworks for viewing fandom more broadly.

These responses suggest that studying fandom can promote a change in a student’s beliefs and assumptions about others. L. Dee Fink writes that significant learning experiences can occur when students are put in situations that force them to acquire new perspectives, especially when they are ‘prompted to compare these new perspectives to their own previous thoughts, feelings, or beliefs’ (162). Along similar lines, Ken Bain writes that students learn through ‘authentic tasks that will challenge them to grapple with ideas, rethink their assumptions, and examine their mental models of reality’ (18). A third of our students admitted openly – and completely unprompted – that this project challenged them to reflect on whether or not their prior understanding of fandom was accurate or necessarily true. As one student wrote, ‘My idea of what fandom is has changed. I

considered it to be a derogatory word given to the crazies who were obsessed over something. Fandom is more than just having an obsession. It's a whole community.' Those who were once seen as 'extreme,' 'ridiculous,' 'obsessed,' or 'crazed' were put in a new context for students, effectively made more complex and even humanized to a greater degree.

70% of students indicated they developed a better appreciation for how people use fandom to construct their personal identity or affirm their personal beliefs and values. These students demonstrated a clear understanding of one of the key concepts in American Studies: 'the ways in which American identities are made and remade over time, shaped by impetus from the inside... and from the outside' (Rudnick 2). One student who spoke with fans of singer songwriter Ben Gibbard observed, 'Fandom gives people a way to discover themselves in a way they may not have without fandom.' In many of their conclusions, students talked about fandom in relation to the self, demonstrating a clear understanding of how fan culture can influence identity formation. Students pointed out that fandom can be a way to 'define your persona,' that it 'becomes a part of you,' that it can develop 'who you are as a person,' and 'shape our identity.' Students also observed that fandom can have an intimate connection to a person's values and belief systems. One student, studying fans of K-pop, wrote, 'I have learned that fandom's influence on identity is as vital as the influence of art, culture, or great texts on the self. That when studying fandom and its place in society, we must first understand that fandom, much like religion, moral beliefs, and preferences, really does shape and make the person.' Students also spoke about the ways in which fandom can help people affirm and accept their identity. For instance, a student who spoke with Marvel Comics fans noted, 'Before I conducted this research, I never understood what it meant for some people to be a fan of something... Sometimes people find being a fan... can help them go through not only hardship or obstacles in life, but it can help one to feel like they belong somewhere or inspire and motivate.' Another student who studied fans of The University of Texas at Austin football team stated, 'I learned that fandom could also exemplify who you are or your past, and your pride in your culture. In any other outside framing, I would not have put those two concepts together, but the interviews brought out these associations.' It was clear that this project helped a majority of students understand identity on a deeper level, inspiring them to reflect on the connections between our cultural affiliations and our sense of self.

49% of students remarked that they developed a better appreciation for how fandom can give people a sense of community and belonging. In their conclusions, students talked about the social aspects of fan culture and the deep value fans placed on their shared connections. One student, for example, wrote that 'the *Doctor Who* fandom is a closely knit community where any individual can feel at home even if that's miles away.' Another student observed of *Glee* fandom, 'It is about who is involved in the community, the special bonds that are created, and being a part of something bigger than yourself.' Another student, studying Star Wars fans, concluded that fandom 'allows us all to create our own

social identity... This fandom that people have creates a bond between individuals and unites them.'

These comments suggest that studying fandom helped students examine an aspect of popular culture that is often overlooked: it can create meaningful connections among the people who consume it. One student expressed this sentiment best when she concluded, 'Rather than fandom being grounded in mass consumerism or political resistance, music festival fandom is a world where fans can connect, develop meaningful relationships with other fans they can identify with, and escape and cope with reality.' In sum, nearly half of our students reported that the study of fandom led them to reflect more deeply on the larger concept of community. As Sarah Robbins notes in *Writing America*, there is value in teaching students to 'uncover and critique the forces that have shaped their own local cultures, as subcultures in national and international contexts' (17). Fandom can be both a 'local culture' and a kind of imagined community, where fans find communion and belonging, and sixty-six out of 135 students felt inspired to comment on this particular aspect of fan society.

29% of students specifically remarked that this project led them to think more deeply about the value of academic fan studies. These students talked about their newfound appreciation for the theories and methods that scholars employ to study audiences. A number of them alluded to the fact that they had never really considered the study of fans important until now, or that, in the words of one student, 'anyone could really study this topic and take it so seriously.' A student who studied Lady Gaga fandom wrote, 'I thought [administering] this survey and reading about fandom was extremely fascinating because it gave me a greater insight into why people like something so much.' Several students recognized the importance of employing a methodology that required them to speak directly to fans about their experiences. 'You cannot describe fandom without talking to the fans themselves,' commented one student who wrote about Taylor Swift fans. 'I have learned from both Cavicchi and my own studies that in order to truly understand fandom, one must extract information through people in person and non-judgmentally hear their experiences, then analyze them,' observed another student, who spoke with Frank Sinatra fans.

That one third of the students directly referred to methodology is an encouraging example of what can happen when teachers use class time to 'help students think about information and ideas the way scholars in the discipline do' (Bain 114). American Studies scholar Lois Rudnick talks about the benefits of developing activities that challenge students to apply the concepts they are learning to real-world topics that are relevant to them. According to Rudnick, such activities can help 'break down the substantial gulf that exists between our students' lives and the academic discourses they are expected to assimilate' (4). We wanted our students to try to 'think like' a fandom scholar, and it is clear that many of them began to do just that. 'This project has opened my eyes to what fandom means. One doesn't often stop to think why someone is a fan,' wrote one student. Katherine Anderson Howell suggests that bringing the study of fandom into the classroom can be a

way to create 'affinity spaces' for students, where they are empowered to 'enter academic culture or to grow as participants in it' (6). Indeed, this assignment encouraged students to view themselves as budding scholars of fan cultures, and at least some of them seemed to feel connected to the larger academic discourse of fan studies.

While the learning outcomes that students demonstrated with regards to preconceptions, awareness, identity, community, and value are all encouraging, we did notice that only seven percent of our students talked directly about issues related to diversity and fandom. Even when these few students did address diversity, it tended to be in a celebratory fashion, along the lines of 'fandom doesn't discriminate,' or fandom transcends racism, sexism, homophobia, and other discriminatory practices. We are aware that this is not an accurate depiction of the complex social and political environment of fandoms, today or in the years our students wrote these papers. This has caused us to reflect on the content of the fandom unit and how we might encourage more critical explorations of diversity and fandom in the future. Including a section on 'toxic fan cultures,' for example, could help students more deeply explore the tensions rife in fandom (we could even assign essays from the themed section on 'toxic fan practices' in the May 2018 issue of *Participations*). Diversifying text selection would be another way to address questions of race, gender, sexuality, and fandom that were not always foregrounded in *Trekkies* and *Tramps Like Us*. We could, for instance, integrate essays on queer identity and *Monster High* fandom, on race and *Vampire Diaries* fandom, and on social exclusion and video game play (Austin; Nuñez; Embrick, Wright, and Lukacs). In addition, we could require that students explore questions of diversity and fandom in their surveys, interviews, and reports. In short, we must do a better job of pushing students to think about the ways in which fandom can provide a space to reflect, explore, and subvert identity positions while also propagating prejudice and toxicity.

### **Conclusion: Awareness, Engagement, and Expert Knowledge**

While the original goal of our American Studies assignment was to get students to engage with fandom in an academic environment, and to understand that the study of popular culture involves not just analysis of the culture industry and its produced content but also meaningful engagement with audiences, the learning outcomes turned out to be broader and even somewhat unexpected. Based on our analysis of the conclusions to student fandom papers, an overwhelming majority of students indicated that the study of fandom resulted in greater self-awareness *and* awareness of others. These results reflect a key point Fink makes in his book *Creating Significant Learning Experiences*: 'When students learn something important about themselves or about others, it enables them to function and interact more effectively' (31). To be sure, for our students, the study of fan communities became an opportunity to reflect on their own preconceptions and biases while interacting with – and learning from – people different from themselves. 'When teachers want students to enhance their human interaction capabilities, they have to find ways to help them become more self-aware and other-aware in relation to the subject being studied,' writes

Fink (162). While we did not necessarily direct students to go forth and become more aware, the fandom assignment unintentionally produced this significant learning outcome. These results reinforce a statement Booth has made about the value of teaching fandom: 'Through fan studies, students see themselves' (2012, 177).

There are two other important points to make about the pedagogical use of fandom: it requires students to engage in the world outside of the classroom and it encourages them to tap into their prior knowledge about contemporary culture. Their awareness and newfound understanding of fandom comes directly from their public participation. Teaching fandom is thus one way of promoting a 'conception of classroom literacy as public work' (Robbins 9). Students learned about methodologies and theoretical frameworks in class, but many did not discover the true value of such methodologies until they were forced to practice and apply them in their own research out in the world. Students came away from the assignment understanding the value of 'reaching outside the classroom walls both in the content of what is studied and its influence on society' (Robbins 8). Including a reflective writing requirement in the paper encouraged students to step back and contemplate what exactly this public engagement meant to them and what 'going public' taught them.

In addition, students were able to employ their own expertise – their prior knowledge and awareness of fan cultures – to shape their projects and inquiry. For example, many students were already fans of the phenomenon they chose to study, and this allowed them to conduct their research as an insider with expert knowledge. Other students were not necessarily fans of their topic, but they were aware of these fan communities because of their general engagement with contemporary culture, and thus they were authentically interested in learning more about these groups. In effect, we invited students to become 'scholars of the now' and allowed them to use their 'intimate, if sometimes tacit, knowledge of the dynamics... of contemporary culture' to conduct academic research (Callahan and Low 57). Ultimately, this project encouraged an *exchange* of expertise: students learned from us when it came to applied fandom methodologies, and, in turn, students taught us something about the many and varied fan communities they studied.

We believe that our findings suggest the value of teaching the theories and methods of fan studies to undergraduates, especially when students are tasked with applying these concepts to field research of fan subcultures. In General Education courses, which are populated by students from across the university, a fan-based pedagogical approach can deepen students' awareness of themselves and others, regardless of their major, and help them make connections between academic discourse and the world outside the classroom. It can challenge them to explore their biases and preconceptions, while also providing them with tools for critically studying what is already familiar in their everyday lives. To that end, we can't help but wonder if upper-division theory and methods courses within American Studies (or other disciplines that may not engage with audience research as much as, say, Communications does) might similarly benefit from focusing more on fan experience. In fact, from this research, we were inspired to contemplate the potential advantages of teaching an entire American Studies seminar on fan cultures, to both undergraduate and

graduate students. As our findings make clear, fandom can be a valuable lens for helping students explore the cultural work of popular culture and the various and contested meanings it assumes as it circulates and resonates in U.S. society.

### **Biographical notes:**

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**Note:**

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