

Review of: *Fandoms in the classroom: A social justice approach to transforming literacy learning*

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In *Fandoms in the Classroom*, Jones and Storm (2025) propose a model of instruction that focuses on utilizing texts that are central to the students' lived experiences. Instead of adopted textbooks, texts in the format of a Reddit post, a group chat, a website, or a comic are utilized in the learning process to create communities where students interact with text, critically analyze text, and experience enthusiasm. The relevance of this practice stands in stark contrast to standardized teaching with "scripted" curricula, curriculum programs that center academic language and provide a tenuous connection to student interests. These programs have coincided with continuing declines in reading in the post-COVID era (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). From the reviewer's perspective, Jones and Storm present an alternative for educators and policymakers to consider, creating an initial step in a discussion to improve teaching practice and incorporate social justice.

In referencing the continued failure of standardized testing and rigid curricula, Jones and Storm present the reader with a vision of teaching through an appreciation of fandom. This fandom recognizes a simple truth: "Reading has changed. The way we think about teaching reading needs to change too" (p. 1). The authors maintain that texts do not just come in the standard form of academic books. The text format that fans engage in include comic books, posters, and "multimodal" formats such as movies, podcasts, and blogs. Fandoms can be defined as interested fans whose interest centers around text formats where they engage with one another and share information on an interest they are passionate about. In the context of education theory, these interests and resulting interactions embody Vygotsky's social learning theory. Teachers utilize the socially bound texts of fandoms in their various modes, modes that mediate the student experience, harnessing specific learning of academic skills through utilizing this socially situated interaction.

It would be easy to dismiss fandom communities of practice as not being rigorous enough or "lowbrow" as the authors mention early on, as standard academic resources are lauded in education, while popular culture and non-academic language resources are derided and judged inferior. After outlining this bias, the authors extensively cite research on the efficacy of studying comic books, anime, and manga interests in classrooms. These sources primarily include case studies, qualitative interviews, ethnographic methodology, and critical essay reflections. While numerous, these sources consist of research that is predominantly older than 5 years, which leads to a noticeable lack of references to the COVID-19 pandemic and its impacts.

In crafting units of instruction with student interests in mind, concerns about content rigor or appropriateness can be remedied effectively. It is important to realize that “text is text” no matter what format words appear in, and that a more challenging environment is created through co-created objectives, assessments, and rubrics, and student passion becomes a catalyst for greater authentic engagement. While content and assessment practices are addressed thoroughly, a main challenge is presented in the lesson design phase of the book. In a chapter on establishing learning goals, the authors contend that standards, curricula, and testing considerations should be considered last in the lesson design process. In advocating for this, the authors go against the grain of established research regarding backward design practice, or “starting with the end in mind” philosophy. The authors contend that starting with standards or goals would constrict student-centered “fandom” learning practices. Research on this concern is not identified, and addressing how the lesson planning with objectives at the end of the planning process conflicts with district policies in many schools is not addressed.

Fandoms also create opportunities for critically examining attitudes and behaviors that students find concerning. The social justice element comes into play as the authors present a table that students have utilized to identify concerns and critically examine attitudes of misogyny in video games, and fandoms where heroes that feature homogenous heroes and exclude students who do not see themselves represented in a particular fandom. In the table, the student identified elements of racism, sexism, homophobia, classism, and disability are identified through the student's selected fandoms of Disney, Batman, DC Comics, and the television version of *Gossip Girl*.

For practicing teachers, Jones and Storm provide realistic ideas to implement a student-centered, fandom approach to teaching. In this approach, students become co-creators of classroom learning goals, both short-term and long-term. In highlighting how this would occur, the authors provide examples of issues that extend through and beyond the curriculum. After this is completed, teachers can align agreed upon learning goals to objectives and standardized assessments. In engaging in this process, student items of interest and culture are addressed through centering texts that interest them and not prescribing standardized curricula while at the same time, addressing fandom practices and formalized school curricula and standards.

A key practice that was recommended was utilizing a pitch meeting. As an exit ticket, students create a map that details their fandom interests and the range of

emotions they may associate with the fandoms they list. This allows the teachers to see student interests, competing feelings about the fandoms, as well as help the class to choose a fandom. This process occurs as a small group of students then pitch different fandoms to potentially study to their peers. After all of the pitches are given, students then vote as to what fandom will be studied.

After a fandom has been selected, the authors provide instructional routines that would be beneficial to utilize. Fandom seminars are an example of one such routine. In this strategy, students present a text they have brought to class. In the ensuing discussion, the teacher provided formalized knowledge when appropriate. When a student discussed an example of the use of exaggerated language, the teacher mentioned that this was "hyperbole." Other terms such as "juxtaposition" and "dichotomy" were also brought in by the teacher at the appropriate time, highlighting how formalized knowledge becomes recognized through the presentation of fandom texts.

Writing conferences were another highlighted routine for instruction in the book that is a valuable practice for educators to read about in this book. In this format, students are working on an assessment to be completed in a manner they created and which was approved. When students were at an impasse, they would sign up on the board for a one-on-one conference with the teacher. It is important to note, these conferences are not what is traditionally meant by "conferences" with a teacher. This outlined approach is student centered and does not lean on the teacher to set up the conference.

Chapter 6 is one of the more intriguing chapters as the authors move the fandom pedagogy discussion over to what it would look like in other realms of study. Academic content hours such as science, mathematics, and government provide unique challenges as students' initial interaction with the content can be confusing or distant. A series of questions are provided to assist students who would choose a content area as a fandom, but the material provided would be beneficial for content area teachers to consider as well.

Chapter 8 contains relevant and practical advice to navigate some of the barriers that a teacher would face in implementing a fanbase classroom. The advice to know what is actually written into local policy is solid advice. Many times, educators assume what can and cannot be done through word of mouth or hearing of different policies which may or may not be relevant. In reading specific policies, a solid solution can be

mapped out. The authors remind that the fear of following the standards does not mean that teachers cannot use other material, as the curriculum is set by the local district. A standard can be met through a wide variety of curricula. In being faced with mandated texts, the authors describe how one of them approached their administrator to explain how their idea would require a text that meets the standards and is more rigorous for students: “We have found that when approaching administrators, it is often best to do so with a clear plan, reasoning, and solutions” (p. 114). As a former principal and superintendent, I can attest that this will go far with most administrators. Teachers who are passionate about learning and who have a fully developed plan are more likely to find a solution with administrators who are tasked with assessing all sides of a possible change in instruction.

Literacy instruction is currently at an important crossroads. Declining assessment scores and lack of student involvement show that decades of prescribed curricula and standardized testing have not created a better situation for learners. Research also identifies that student interest is important to include. All too often though, this is valued in words, but classroom practice continues to be teacher-centered instruction. Critical thinking is a related value, but all too often, becomes enshrined in a “critical thinking worksheet” instead of students interrogating a text meaningfully. Jones and Storm’s book is a detailed resource on how creating fandoms in the language arts classroom would work and teachers will appreciate the attention to detail, which is buoyed by research, but not overshadowed by research in each chapter.

References

Jones, K., & Storm, S. (2025). *Fandoms in the classroom: A social justice approach to transformative literacy learning*. Myers Education Press.

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