

6-27-2011

# The Role of Feedback in Two Fanfiction Writing Groups

Chad Eric Littleton

*Indiana University of Pennsylvania*

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THE ROLE OF FEEDBACK  
IN TWO FANFICTION WRITING GROUPS

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

Chad Eric Littleton

Indiana University of Pennsylvania

August 2011

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Indiana University of Pennsylvania  
School of Graduate Studies and Research  
Department of English

We hereby approve the dissertation of

Chad Eric Littleton

Candidate for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Bennett A. Rafoth, Ed.D.  
University Professor and Professor of English,  
Advisor

---

---

Nancy Hayward, Ph.D.  
Professor of English

---

---

Gian S. Pagnucci, Ph.D.  
University Professor and Professor of English

ACCEPTED

---

Timothy P. Mack, Ph.D.  
Dean  
School of Graduate Studies and Research

---

Title: The Role of Feedback in Two Fanfiction Writing Groups

Author: Chad Eric Littleton

Dissertation Chair: Dr. Bennett A. Rafoth

Dissertation Committee Members: Dr. Nancy Hayward  
Dr. Gian S. Pagnucci

As a composition teacher and scholar, I have often found myself frustrated with peer review sessions in my composition classes, a frustration scholars such as Harris (1992), VanDeWeghe (2004), and Miller (2005) have noted is common for writing teachers. Online fanfiction groups, however, often use peer review as a central practice of their communities. This study analyzed fanfiction groups in order to see how feedback is used within these groups and how that feedback shapes the practices of the communities, as well as how different types of fanfiction groups might use feedback differently.

Using Wenger's (2004) concept of communities of practice, I studied fanfiction at two diverse fanfiction online groups, the *G.I. Joe* subsite of Fanfiction.net, a large, public group devoted to sharing *G.I. Joe* fanfiction for the enjoyment of the members, and Joe Bootcamp, a small, private group dedicated to helping *G.I. Joe* fanfiction authors become better writers. This study analyzed peer feedback from twenty stories for each fanfiction community using a modified version of Simmons' (2003) categories of peer feedback. Interviews with members of the fanfiction groups were also conducted.

Results found that types of feedback at each group were shaped by the domain of each community, with the large, public Fanfiction.net preferring comments offering praise and encouragement, and the small, private Joe

Bootcamp valuing comments concerned with revision and editing. While many composition scholars such as VanDeWeghe (2004) and Murray (2004) discourage editing until later in the writing process, fanfiction writers see editing and revision as overlapping concepts, and many authors seek comments on both at the same time. Feedback is an essential practice of these fanfiction groups, offering further evidence that most authors can benefit from the feedback process.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As anyone who has written a dissertation can attest, no one can finish this journey without the support and encouragement of a network of friends, family, and colleagues, and I am truly blessed to have so many wonderful people in my life that have contributed to my successful completion of this project. First I would like to thank Dr. Ben Rafoth for serving as my advisor throughout this long process. His guidance, support, and patience kept me on task, and his uncanny ability to ask just the right questions made this dissertation much better than I ever thought it could be. I could not have asked for a better advisor for this experience. I am also thankful to have Drs. Nancy Hayward and Gian Pagnucci serve on my committee. Both offered insightful suggestions and challenging questions that helped shape the final product. It was a pleasure working with my committee throughout this journey.

I would be remiss not to acknowledge the participants in this study, Allie Faireborne, amykay73, DesertFox, GI Jaye, LittleLadyhawke, and suspreena. Without their willingness to let me into their community and share in their fanfiction, this study would not be possible. I hope they all continue to write for many years. I also want to thank Larry Hama, godfather of the *G.I. Joe* universe, for creating the characters and world for these fanfiction writers to play in.

A person is fortunate in his career if he has a mentor to help guide him in his career—I am lucky enough to have had two such people in my life. Dr. Pam Childers was the catalyst for my pursuit of doctoral study. As mentor and friend, she encouraged me to write and taught me the importance of research, and I

learned so much from our collaborations at McCallie and at conferences both regionally and nationally. I am proud to call her my friend and wish her well in her retirement. Equally important is Dr. Lauren Ingraham. Much of my teaching philosophy can be attributed to her, and her encouragement and support have meant the world to me. I could not have asked for a better Director of Composition throughout this process.

A special thank you also goes out to Dr. James Inman. James taught me how to tackle a long writing process such as this, and his library of composition texts made research a lot easier than it otherwise could have been.

I would also like to thank my colleagues at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga for their support the last few years. They never gave up on me, even when I wondered if I would ever finish. A special thanks in particular is due to Dr. Susan North, Tiffany Mitchell, April Green, Tim Parker, Mike Jaynes, Paige Keown, Dr. Joe Wilferth, Spring Atkinson, Ann Buggiey, Jenny Smith, Heather Grothe, Yvonne Artis, Dr. Joyce Smith and Suzy Davis.

Grad school was made much easier by the friends I made, and none were as important as the IUP ABD club. They encouraged me and supported me, and I am proud of each of them for also finishing this journey. I am especially thankful for Drs. Janet Pierce, Deborah Sams, Gail Bondi, and Melody Bynum Pickle for their continued support and friendship. Done is good!

I am blessed by my friends at Harrison United Methodist Church in Harrison, Tennessee. They took care of my wife while I was gone for months at a time, particularly my last summer when she was pregnant. Their prayers and

friendship have been invaluable. Thank you to my Heavenly Father for placing such wonderful friends in my life.

A special thank you goes to my parents, David & Linda Littleton, and my in-laws, Mark & Judy McKnight, for their sacrifices and support that made this dream possible. From financial support to babysitting services to emotional support, they were there for me, and words cannot express how grateful I am.

Finally, my greatest appreciation goes to my wonderful wife, Rebecca, and my two awesome kids, Erica and Robert. Without their love and blessings, I could never have finished this study. They are my world!

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

Fanfiction, or fanfic, groups are writing groups devoted to producing new, unauthorized fictional works based on someone else's published characters and settings. Though science-fiction television shows such as *Star Trek* and *The X-Files* are the most common subject matter, almost any television show, film, novel, cartoon, comic, or video game can or does have a fanfiction base devoted to it. For example, the website Fanfiction.net offers over one thousand sub-sites, including pages dedicated to television shows as diverse as *Quantum Leap*, *Growing Pains*, *JAG*, *The A-Team*, and *Hannah Montana*; movies ranging from science fiction epics like *Star Wars* and *Jurassic Park* to comedies such as *Miss Congeniality* and *The Mighty Ducks* and musicals including *Annie* and *Chicago*; video games from *Tetris* to *Halo*; and even miscellaneous topics like "Marching Band" and "Wrestling."

Though fanfiction existed long before the internet, first gaining popularity in the 1960s and 1970s with printed fan-zines (Coppa, 2006), online capabilities have given rise to a fanfiction boom, as writers are able to share their stories with a much larger audience. The internet has also allowed writers to give and receive feedback much faster, which allows the writers to post multiple drafts of their stories.

When my wife first introduced me to the world of fanfiction a few years ago, I was fascinated with the idea of strangers sharing stories based on popular characters from other media yet skeptical that there would be anything actually worth reading. Why, for instance, do people spend time writing and posting

stories based on other authors' work instead of just creating their own stories?

What motivates these writers to spend time reading and responding to countless stories that even at their best are derivatives of the original works?

On the contrary, I found that while many of the stories were watered-downed tales that paled in comparison to the original works, some were quite creative, well-developed, and a joy to read. What I found most intriguing, however, were not the stories themselves, but rather the feedback and "reviews" to each piece left by readers, who were often fanfiction writers themselves. After teaching freshman composition courses where students are reluctant to comment on each other's writing and often resort to bland, elementary comments such as "this is good" or "you misspelled a few words," I was fascinated that reviewers of fanfiction were voluntarily giving one another constructive feedback to either help make the piece better or to motivate the author to continue writing and sharing additional chapters or stories. Composition scholars such as Woods (2002) and Auten (2005) have discussed the problems with classroom-directed peer review, but little research has been done on peer response in fanfiction settings. Though many comments on these fanfiction stories were basic, quick responses (i.e. "this is good"), many also seemed to be an integral component of the writing process, an idea I have tried to stress to my own students, though sometimes with only limited success. For fanfiction writers, however, feedback from other fans seemed to be desired and valued. For instance, consider the following exchange between members of one fanfiction community, Joe Bootcamp. This story, authored by member Allie Faireborne and responded to by

member GI Jaye, represents a typical peer response at this fanfiction group. GI Jaye's comments are in italics:

*Overall, I think it has potential for a good story. Some of the sentences/ phrasing were a bit awkward or unclear, but I think you have a good underlying plot. I would like to see a bit more elaboration on why Hawk thought this was necessary, etc. I think it could be an explanation that fits in well with what we've seen in spoilers of the relaunch.*

Hawk rolled into the new Joe base. It had been a year since the team disbanded and now they had been reformed just a month ago. *(This is sort of awkward, Is there a way to split it or rephrase it? Maybe, "The team had reformed just a month ago after a one year disbandment".)* 'Everything looks different,' he thought to himself. It had been a year since anyone on the team had seen him. He disappeared and didn't even go to the funeral of the Joe he felt the closest to. But he had his reasons and today they would find out why and when they do one man will probably never forgive him again. *(This sentence runs on. Can you split it into two?)*

Scarlett opened the door to the room that the new Joe team was meeting in. "Hawk?" She asked in disbelief as she watched her ex-CO come down the hall towards her in his wheelchair.

“Yes Scarlett.” Hawk said as he plastered a fake smile on his lips. Truth was he was nervous as hell for what he was about to do. “I need to talk to everyone in that room.”

“Y...yes of course sir.” Scarlett said and opened the door for him.

Hawk rolled in to see Storm Shadow. He knew that he was now part of the team and supposedly reformed, but he still wasn't so sure. There were also Roadblock, Snake Eyes, Duke, and the one he was the most nervous about, Flint. *(This is in a passive voice. It will flow more smoothly if you put something like, "Roadblock, Snake-eyes, Duke, and Flint- the one he was most nervous about- were also there.)* They all looked at him with a look that was the mixture of questioning and shock. “Hello Joes.” *(Instead of using looked twice, maybe "They all stared..." or "looked at him with a mixture of..."*

“Hawk?” Duke asked still in shock. “Where the hell have you been?”

Hawk raised his hand to silence everyone else. “Let me tell you all what I came to say.” He looked right at Flint and froze for a moment, worried about everyone's reactions, but Flint's the most. “Lady Jaye...Alison...is alive.”

Flint's face turned beet red. “What the hell are you talking about? I buried her a year ago. This isn't funny!!!!”

Hawk knew this wasn't going to be easy. He opened up the black leather briefcase that was on his lap and took out several recent pictures of Lady Jaye, tossing them on the table in front of him. "As you can see Dash, she is very much alive. I've kept her in hiding for the past year."

"She's alive and you didn't fucking tell me about it?!?" Flint roared as he stood up and slammed both his fists on the mahogany table. "Where the hell is she?!?" *Nice pissed off Flint image.*

"Calm down Dash." Roadblock said as he put his big hand on Flint's shoulder. *(I'm glad someone is calming him. Maybe some more reaction from others here?)*

"Let me start from the beginning," Hawk said. "When they captured you after running you off the road Alison was still alive. She was rushed to the hospital and operated on. But the Red Shadows *(No apostrophe.)* tried three times to kill her in the hospital. I made it look like she did die and moved her to a cabin I have that no one else knows about. *(Maybe just say a secluded or secret cabin. If Hawk's kept his cabin a secret for this long would he so easily admit that it's his when he doesn't have to?)* She woke up right before they got you back, Dash, *(From where? The wreck?)* but she couldn't remember anything. To keep her safe no one could know she was alive, including you." *(Can you elaborate?)*

“Then why come back now to tell us? Is she asking for Flint?” Scarlett asked, still in shock that her best friend was alive.

“No.” Hawk said sadly as he looked down at his lap. “She still hasn’t regained any of her memory, except she can remember her training. I feel that my keeping her safe has also impaired her recovery. I want to take you to her, Flint.”

Flint stared at Hawk. He was furious, that much was obvious. But there was something in his eyes that they hadn’t seen in over a year. There was hope. “I’ll be ready in ten minutes.” He turned and stormed out the other door. *(What other door? Is it somehow relevant that it's a different door or can you just say the door?)*

GI Jaye’s comments don’t just simply give an opinion on the quality of Allie Faireborne’s story; rather they offer insight into how she can make the story better, primarily by focusing on the needs of her reader, in this case GI Jaye, but also on grammar and mechanics.

Strikingly, I found that the responses of readers seemed just as important as the stories themselves in creating the fan community, which is at the centerpiece of fanfiction websites. These discoveries, however, led to other curiosities. I wondered, for instance, whether fanfiction authors were motivated more by positive comments about their stories or constructive criticism of their writing ability. Might the answer be different for different fanfiction communities? Are these writers more interested in keeping their fandom alive or in their own

growth as writers, or might they simply be motivated by their inner drive to write? After all, unlike college students that must face an inevitable grade, fanfiction writers are creating and sharing stories by their own free will. In the above piece, GI Jaye is not grading Allie Faireborne; in fact, no one is. What, then, motivates Allie Faireborne and other fanfiction authors to share their stories and seek criticism?

Does the personality of the author affect what types of feedback they are receptive to? Styslinger (1999) has shown that male and female responders respond to classroom writing in distinctively different ways, but does this hold true for fanfiction authors and responders? Are responders to fanfiction influenced by their previous training in peer review, such as in a classroom composition class, or are they responding for other reasons? As Min (2005) has shown, writers in classroom settings don't become successful peer reviewers overnight and must be trained by the teacher on how to respond. Why, then, does peer review seem to work in fanfiction writing groups? In classroom settings, peer review is often a required component of the course that is usually graded (Lawrence and Sommers, 1996), but in fanfiction communities, responses are ordinarily voluntary, so does that change the nature of the feedback? Also, do different types of fanfiction groups use feedback differently? This study found that to be the case, and the reasons why are best viewed through the lens of communities of practice.

## Fanfiction Groups as Communities of Practice

Fanfiction communities are, in essence, self-sponsored writing groups, similar to those discussed by Ann Ruggles Gere (1987). Because these groups lack a traditional “teacher” as one would find in an academic classroom setting, they are autonomous, unlike the nonautonomous groups found in a classroom setting. There are, however, usually leaders of the group, most often referred to as the moderators, though their role is primarily to ensure the group runs smoothly. Since participation is entirely voluntary and members are free to leave at any time, writers must be motivated by forces besides grades and tangible rewards. Gonzalez (2000) argued that successful writing groups are built on trust, which most likely plays an important role within the fanfiction group. Members of fanfiction communities often begin as readers of fanfiction, and then become responders of fanfiction, before some choose to write and post their own stories. Members learn these roles as they experience fanfiction communities, which James Paul Gee has described as learning the Discourse of the community (1990).

Like most writing groups, fanfiction communities can be more accurately described as what Etienne Wenger (1998) termed “communities of practice.” In communities of practice, individuals with a common interest participate in the activities of a community and continuously create a shared identity through contributing to the activities and practices of the group. As Wenger (2004) elaborated, communities of practice begin with a domain, an area of interest that brings a group of people together, who in turn form a community. This

community, in turn, develops a body of “knowledge, methods, tools, stories, cases, documents, which members share and develop together” (Wenger, 2004, p. 3) Fanfiction communities begin through the love of a specific fandom (the domain) and members form a community of writers and responders (the community) who produce fanfiction stories and responses (the practice) for the community of practice. By writing and responding to fanfiction in a specific group, members continually reshape, expand, and define the identity and fanfiction of the community. Through the community of practice, members also shape their own identities as writers within the membership of the community and increase their own ability as writers both through the writing they produce and the act of giving and receiving feedback from other members of the community of practice. Members of fanfiction communities of practice operate in many ways like peer tutors in writing center communities of practice, primarily through the act of feedback allowing the writer to reshape his or her own writing as well as the responder’s identity as both tutor and writer. As Geller, Eodice, Condon, Carroll, and Boquet (2007) have argued, “their identities as writers can, will, and should influence their tutoring” (p. 73).

For scholars of composition studies, these fanfiction communities of practice offer the opportunity to learn more about the benefits of collaborative learning and the motivation of writers in a little-explored non-academic setting, as well as the role feedback plays within these non-academic writing groups. This is important, because fanfiction groups are at their essence writing groups. By examining how fanfiction authors use feedback, I hope to show that different

types of feedback serve various purposes for authors and even some types of feedback that composition scholars have sometimes overlooked or dismissed as being of little usefulness are sometimes valued by authors in certain circumstances.

### Purpose of the Study

This study will examine two online fan fiction communities as communities of practice in order to gain insight into why and how writers are motivated to write fanfiction, how writers give and receive feedback, and how they use that feedback within the writing process. This study will also explore the dynamics of how each community of practice functions and how the interactions of members of each group help and/or hinder the writing process. By examining these fanfiction groups as communities of practice, this study will attempt to show how members of the fanfiction communities learn through the process of contributing to the community through both the stories they produce and the feedback they provide others to help shape the stories that will expand the literature of the groups and, by extension, the groups' respective shared identities. As Wenger (1998) stated, "We all have our own theories and ways of understanding the world, and our communities of practice are places where we develop, negotiate, and share them" (p. 48).

The first group, "Joe Bootcamp," is a small (5-10 active members at any given time), private writing community with structured rules for membership. United by their desire to write fan fiction based on the Marvel (1982-1994)/Devil's Due (2001-2008)/IDW (2008-present) comic book *G. I. Joe: A Real American*

*Hero/G. I. Joe: America's Elite* (which in turn is based on the children's toy line, though the comic contains adult themes such as death and violence), these writers are given writing assignments by a moderator with deadlines they must meet or face expulsion from the group. These writing assignments come from suggestions from the members of the group, and a moderator posts the assignment. Members then have a set period of time to create a story based upon the assignment, and then they post their stories to the group's Yahoo Group site. Members are also required to respond to and critique a set number (usually two, sometimes more) of their fellow writers' drafts during each writing cycle, which are then used for revision of the stories produced. Motivated by the love of the source material and the products being created, members revise in order to make their drafts better, for the benefit of themselves and the writing community. The moderator, while also an active writer and responder, serves primarily to post assignments, ensure members are writing and responding to drafts, and screen requests to join from potential members of the group. Membership has consisted of members of both genders, though females have held an overwhelming majority of membership and make up the entirety of the most recent active membership, a trend consistent in most fanfiction communities (Clerc, 1996). While members can be as young as teenagers, the vast majority of members are in their late twenties to early forties, the ages that grew up playing with the *G.I. Joe: A Real American Hero* toy line, comic book, and cartoon series in the 1980s. Membership also represents a variety of educational, political, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Like many online

communities, however, specific demographics are difficult to know, due to the anonymous nature of the internet (Chawki, 2009). In these online communities, and Joe Bootcamp is no exception, members are rarely known by their everyday identities, but instead through online aliases. However, within the community of practice, these online identities are their identities for the purpose of creating the shared ideas and practices of the community.

In many ways, the group is similar to Elbow's idea of a "teacherless writing class," (1973) though without that intention. In Peter Elbow's *Writing Without Teachers* (1973), Elbow posited that writers meet weekly to read each other's work. Members would discuss each author's writing with the goal of getting the author to see not necessarily what is wrong or right with the writing, but instead what effect it has on the readers in the group, as opposed to a "teacher." Elbow's book proved to be wildly popular and influential, and many modern writing groups can trace their inspiration to Elbow's idea. Though the members of Bootcamp do not credit Elbow as an influence, the similarities are apparent.

For instance, while assignments at Joe Bootcamp are less frequent than Elbow's suggestion of weekly writing, and communication takes place online rather than a classroom, Bootcamp members must commit to the group, actively participate as authors and responders, and commit to giving honest reactions to each piece, all criteria echoed in Elbow's book.

In addition to the Bootcamp community, this dissertation also looks at the G.I. Joe fanfiction sub-site on Fanfiction.net. Fanfiction.net is the largest fanfiction site on the internet, containing over one thousand sub-sites in

categories including anime, books, cartoons, comics, games, movies, and TV shows. Unlike the closed nature of the Bootcamp site, this website allows users to post stories and give and receive feedback in an open public forum that can be accessed by anyone without required membership (though writers must complete a free registration process and be at least thirteen years old), thus creating a much larger, more dynamic, and less intimate community of writers. It also serves as an access point for many fanfiction writers, and most Bootcamp members, including all the participants in this study, have posted at Fanfiction.net. Writers represent a variety of ages and genders, but specific demographics are difficult to obtain due to the anonymous nature of this site in particular and fanfiction groups in general. This group is still a community of practice, but the open nature of the site and the focus on the story more than the writer's growth changes both the nature of feedback as well as the identity of the group. Because it is less restrictive than Bootcamp, writers tend to be less motivated by feedback that helps improve the drafts and more motivated by positive comments about the stories; that is, whether the audience likes or enjoys the stories. Revision of drafts is much less common, and feedback is often used more as a means of affirmation of the writer and the story. Sometimes these writers have even been known to hold their stories "hostage;" that is, they begin by posting part of a story and refuse to post more until they receive a number of positive reviews of their piece. Because Fanfiction.net is an open forum, it is interesting to juxtapose motivating factors to write, types of feedback, and

revision processes of these writers with those in the private, closed forum of Bootcamp.

Of course, there is no shortage of groups devoted to fanfiction. There are literally hundreds of groups devoted to various fandoms, covering everything from *Star Trek* to *Hannah Montana*. Why, then, is this research concerned with *G.I. Joe* fanfiction? The answer is twofold.

First, this dissertation is concerned with *G.I. Joe* fanfiction because of the author's personal interest in the fandom. While I have never previously composed a fanfiction piece of my own, I have collected *G.I. Joe* comic books and toys since I was a child. What started as a childhood diversion evolved into a collector's hobby as an adult. Therefore, I have an in depth knowledge of the source material, which puts me in a better position to understand fandom-specific references within this fanfiction. Often, fanfiction references obscure events, characters, and settings from the source material, and my familiarity with the comic book and television program will better allow me to understand these references within the fanfiction universe. By being familiar with the source, I will be better prepared to understand both the fiction itself, as well as the responses to the fanfiction, which also often contain references to the fandom.

The second, and more personal, reason for choosing *G.I. Joe* fanfiction is because it is the Joe Bootcamp fanfiction that triggered my interest in fanfiction to begin with. Though I was familiar with fanfiction already, I had never really taken it seriously or given it much credibility, particularly from a scholarly perspective. It was simply something that my wife did as a hobby. However, when she

explained to me what Bootcamp was and how it operated, I was struck by its similarities to Peter Elbow's teacherless writing class (1973), as well as its similarity to peer review in my own composition classes. Frustrated with his own inability to write for teachers, Elbow designed his influential proposition of a teacherless writing class where dedicated group members would meet at least once a week to share their work and respond to each other's work with the goal of seeing the effect the writing had on the members of the group. Elbow's teacherless writing class, like Joe Bootcamp, was, in essence, a community of practice. With Elbow's teacherless writing class in mind, I wondered what motivated these writers to not only write fanfiction, but also to solicit and give feedback from other writers. Therefore, this was a logical group to focus this dissertation on.

The *G.I. Joe* subsection of the Fanfiction.net website was selected because it serves as juxtaposition for the Joe Bootcamp web group. Whereas Joe Bootcamp is a small, intimate, private community of writers regulated by a moderator, Fanfiction.net is a large, public forum for posting fanfiction that anyone can post both fanfiction and feedback on. Both groups together represent a dichotomy of the two types of communities that exist for most genres of fanfiction: the small, intimate community and the large, public community. As Gere (1987) has shown, there are varying social dimensions of writing groups, and fanfiction groups are no different. Examining these social dimensions will help determine the extent to which the type of community affects the nature of feedback, as well as how that feedback is incorporated into the revision process.

This study, in turn, examines how the feedback and revisions influence the practices of the communities.

By studying the interactions of the group members in both fanfiction environments, particularly how feedback is given and used in revision, I gained insight into different motivations for writing fanfiction, what types of feedback are most helpful to writers, how writers decide whether to accept or reject suggestions, and how the overall quality of drafts improve through the revision process.

It is important to remember that members of both fanfiction communities serve as writers of fanfiction and writers of responses to fanfiction. For purposes of this study, when writers are discussed as writers of fanfiction stories, they are referred to as “authors.” When discussed as writers of comments to those stories, they are referred to as “responders.”

### Research Questions

The following research questions are central to this study:

1. How do participants experience the fanfiction community?
2. What types of feedback do authors give? How does feedback impact the community?
3. How do authors react to different types of feedback? Do they consider certain types of feedback more helpful than others?

### Overview of Succeeding Chapters

Chapter two includes a review of related literature on fanfiction groups, communities of practice, and peer response, the primary focus of this study. It

offers a brief history of fanfiction, showing how it has especially evolved with the advent of the World Wide Web, as well as short histories of each of the fanfiction groups being studied.

Chapter three focuses on the methodology of the study and introduces the participants in this study, who are all current or former members of both communities of practice. This chapter looks at each research question in more depth and shows how each question is addressed in the study. This study uses both textual analysis of responses to fanfiction and interviews of the participants. Textual analysis is based on a modified version of Simmons' (2003) coding system of categories of feedback used in his research of high school writing students. Feedback was coded as one of seven categories of feedback common in fanfiction groups. Interviews were conducted with six current and former members of Joe Bootcamp in order to better understand how feedback is used. This chapter explores how those methods are used and interpreted within the study.

Chapter four focuses on the results of the textual analysis of feedback for both the *G.I. Joe* subsection of Fanfiction.net and the Joe Bootcamp group. It shows how feedback is used within the fanfiction groups, as well as the types of feedback most common in each group. This chapter shows that feedback at the *G.I. Joe* subsite of Fanfiction.net tends to be focused on comments offering general praise and encouragement and very few comments concerning grammar and mechanics. Conversely, feedback at Joe Bootcamp included a significant amount of feedback addressing grammar and very few comments designed to

offer praise. Both sites had a significant amount of feedback that addressed needs and reactions of the responders.

Finally, chapter five includes lessons learned, limitations of the study, and opportunities for further study.

## CHAPTER TWO: A REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Before examining how feedback is used in online fanfiction groups such as Fanfiction.net and Joe Bootcamp, it is important to contextualize fanfiction groups, as well as this study, within composition studies. Fanfiction by its very nature is composition. Though fanfiction usually involves creating fictional stories based on other people's characters or settings, fanfiction authors still incorporate many hallmarks of composition, such as innovation, revision, editing, and feedback into their writing process. Understanding fanfiction is important for composition scholars because awareness of how fanfiction authors use and value feedback can offer insight into the use of feedback in other areas of composition studies.

In order to understand the relationship of feedback to fanfiction and fanfiction to composition, we must first look at the history of fanfiction. Doing so offers scholars connections between the history of fanfiction and other areas of composition studies, including the development of writing groups and the increasing use of and dependence on technology within the field. This chapter will then offer a history of the fanfiction groups studied here, in order to show how they fit into the overall context of fanfiction groups.

Next, this chapter examines relevant literature on fanfiction and shows the limited research on feedback within fanfiction, particularly by scholars in other academic disciplines, and shows why research on the role of feedback in fanfiction groups needs to be examined, especially by composition scholars. Relevant research on communities of practice are also looked at in order to show

how this is a relevantly recent theory for composition studies and why it is appropriate and well-suited for examining how feedback is used within fanfiction groups and why it could be used by composition scholars to view feedback in other situations.

Last, this chapter examines relevant studies on peer feedback to show how research on peer review, both in the classroom and in online learning communities, has shaped this study. It also shows the limitations of research by composition scholars on peer review in alternative situations for writing, particularly in fanfiction groups, a deficiency this study hopes to address.

#### A Brief History of Fanfiction

As long as there have been stories, there has probably been some form of fanfiction. At its most basic essence, fanfiction derives from other literary works, through its borrowing of characters, settings, plots, etc. Therefore, the argument can be made that literary works such as Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, and many of Shakespeare's plays are a form of fanfiction, as each adopts elements from previous works. Hale (2005) has argued that an early example is the King Arthur legends, as the character of Lancelot was added by Norman "fans" of the tales. She further argued that John Lydgate's "The Siege of Thebes," written in 1421, was a fan continuation of *Canterbury Tales*. Pugh (2004) included recent examples such as John Reed's reworking of Orwell's *Animal Farm* in 2001's *Snowball's Chance*. Seth Grahame-Smith's *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (2009), which credits Jane Austen as co-author, could also qualify, as it takes Austen's original novel and adds zombies and horror

elements to the plot. Derecho (2006), however, has argued that these works are not truly fanfiction; rather, she claims they are archontic literature, “literature composed of texts that are archival in nature...that build on a previously existing text and are not lesser than the source text” (p. 64-65), and modern fanfiction is born from it.

Fanfiction is somewhat unique because it is hard to classify in terms of academic discipline. Does the study of fanfiction belong to scholars of popular culture, cultural studies, composition theory, or creative writing? The answer is both all of these and none of these. While aspects of fanfiction have been studied in each of these disciplines, as well as by women’s studies (Clerc, 1996), legal studies (Tushnet, 1997), and sociology scholars (McRae, 1996), fanfiction and its creators have also traditionally been marginalized by academia as being derivative works not worth full attention. Studies of fanfiction were primarily done outside of the academy, usually by fanfiction writers themselves, and tended to focus on issues of concern to members of the fanfiction community. Only recently have scholars begun to study fanfiction on its own merits, rather than as a derivative, abnormal activity. While scholars in other fields are focusing on social, legal, and psychological aspects of fanfiction, the study of fanfiction as it relates to composition studies remains relatively untapped.

Few studies (Hale, 2005 being a rare attempt) have attempted to catalog a complete history of fanfiction, quite possibly because of the sheer improbability of the task and major disagreements as to when fanfiction began. As Coppa (2006) has shown, “not only has a comprehensive history of media fandom not been

written, but there also have been very few histories of individual fandoms and the works of art they produced” (p. 41). This is not unlike Gere’s (1987) history of writing groups; both fanfiction groups and writing groups are quite old, but only in the last twenty years have scholars recognized their impact and usefulness, the latter in large part due to Gere’s influence. Gere’s chronicle of the history of writing groups traced the history of writing groups from their beginnings as social clubs to their many modern incarnations, particularly in academia, as well as their possibilities for the future. Writing groups have continued evolving, and now they also include online writing groups. Of course, fanfiction groups are themselves a form of writing groups, so writing groups are at least as old as fanfiction groups. Most scholars, therefore, have not studied fanfiction in a broad, historical manner; rather they tend to analyze one individual subject of fanfiction. One large attempt to do so was done by Laura Hale (2005), and was published (but since removed) on The Fanfic Symposium, a now-inactive website established as a collection of essays by fanfiction writers on topics of interest to fanfiction authors and readers. Hale has since established The Fan History Wiki ([http://www.fanhistory.com/wiki/Main\\_Page](http://www.fanhistory.com/wiki/Main_Page)), a website dedicated to compiling and preserving the history of fandoms, which fanfiction comes from. Because of the limited availability of histories of fanfiction, this study relies heavily on the work of Hale (2005) and Coppa (2006), who have produced the most comprehensive histories to date.

The term fanfiction is born out of the fanzines, such as *The Comet*, that first began appearing for fans of science fiction in the 1930s (Pohl, 1974). These

fanzines prompted readers to write their own science fiction stories, which could then be shared with other readers. Occasionally these stories could borrow from other science fiction works. Small groups of fans in the same city could also write stories to share with one another, though geography and expense made it difficult to share stories with large groups of fellow fans. Therefore, fans in one particular geographic area were often isolated communities. There were exceptions, however, as fans in larger cities such as New York and Philadelphia began to organize science fiction conventions, and the first World Science Fiction Convention was held in New York City in 1939. Now called Worldcon, this convention continues to be held today (Coppa, 2006). These conventions not only allowed science fiction fans to come together, but they were also a place for fanfiction writers to share their original stories.

Fanfiction was not limited to the science fiction genre. Around the same time of the rise of science fiction fanzines, fans of Jane Austen, in particular, were sharing fan stories through the mail, in a format not unlike the science fiction fanzines (Hale, 2005). Nevertheless, science fiction fans were the primary driving force in the rise of media fandom as a whole, and fan fiction in particular.

The rise of fanfiction did not really take off until the 1960s (Coppa, 2006). In 1959, the first commercial Xerox machine was produced, and as fanfiction writers began having access to this technology, they became able to easily distribute their stories for a wider audience. Previously they were forced to duplicate primarily by hand, which limited the scope of their audience. Much like

Gutenberg's printing press led to a rapid rise in the availability of the written word, the Xerox machine increased the availability of fan-produced stories.

Also during this time, there was an increase in the number of science fiction television shows, and the fans of these shows, particularly *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* (1964-1968) and *Star Trek* (1966-1969), tended to form close-knit communities, which fostered the development of fanfiction (Coppa, 2006). 1967 brought the first fanzine for *Star Trek* fans, *Spockanalia*, followed by another, *ST-Phile*, in 1968. Both fanzines offered fanfiction, which further increased the popularity of the medium within the science fiction community. Interestingly, a majority of these fanfiction writers were female (Derecho, 2006), particularly within the *Star Trek* community (Curtin, 2002; Coppa, 2006). *Star Trek* fandom and fanfiction gained a boost with the 1975 publication of "*Star Trek*" *Lives!* (Lichtenberg, Marshak & Winston, 1975), particularly with the final chapter, "Do-It-Yourself *Star Trek*—The Fan Fiction." This chapter celebrated, as Coppa (2006) claimed, "fan fiction as a literature written mainly by women" (p. 46), through its discussion of various fanfiction stories and their focus on strong female characters and relationships between both established and new characters. Both elements are common in many genres of fanfiction even today, as will be seen in my discussions of *G.I. Joe* fanfiction throughout this dissertation. In addition, the strong, original, female character, often partially based on an idealized version of the writer herself, would come to be termed "Mary Sue" fiction, a name coined by Paula Smith in a parody of that type of fanfiction (Verba, 1996). Relationship stories would, in turn, inspire what would

become known as slash fiction, homoerotic stories featuring what were originally heterosexual male characters.

Another significant event in the development of fanfiction occurred in 1973 with the advent of FTP, or file transfer protocol (Hale, 2005). FTP allowed fanfiction writers to host archives of stories. Due to technological limitations of the time, FTP use was not widespread, but it did serve as a precursor for later generations of fanfiction, particularly after the rise of internet usage.

The 1970s also brought a cultural change in the popular television shows and movies being shown to audiences. Buddy cop shows such as *Starsky and Hutch* (1975-1979) joined the science fiction television shows of the 1960s, and fan fiction writers followed. According to Camille Bacon-Smith (1992), these shows were a natural inspiration for relationship fanfiction, as much of these shows' focus was on the bond between principle characters, not unlike the earlier relationship of Kirk and Spock on *Star Trek*. Fanfiction began branching out, and while *Star Trek* still had a large following of fanfiction writers and readers, other media also began establishing a fanfiction foothold. This was never more evident than with the release of 1977's *Star Wars* blockbuster, which not only rivaled *Star Trek* in the amount of fan fiction produced, but also served, as noted by Coppa (2006) to splinter many science fiction fans (and fanfiction writers) into *Star Wars* vs. *Star Trek* factions. Fanfiction, however, would continue to grow as an outlet for fans and writers.

As more and more television shows, movies, and comic books were adapted into fanfiction in the 1970s and 1980s, it was only a matter of time

before writers would begin to write crossover stories, or stories that featured characters and settings from multiple genres. Among the first known crossover stories were stories featuring crossovers of characters from *Star Trek* and *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* (Verba, 1996). Other crossover works would follow, eventually becoming a frequent subgenre of fanfiction. With the rise of cable television, more television shows were able to be broadcast, thus increasing the amount of medium available for fanfiction writers, and fanfiction continued to become more prevalent. Technological advances also led to the decline of the traditional fanzines, as home computers led to the adoption of tools such as Usenet and bulletin boards to transcribe and distribute fanfiction works much quicker than the earlier ink and paper methods (Coppa, 2006). Usenet, which was founded in 1980, in particular became a popular hub for sharing and discussing fanfiction, as well as providing feedback on stories, something which was a painfully slow process beforehand.

The 1980s also brought copyright issues to the forefront of fanfiction discussions, a debate that continues to the present day. There had been occasional debates prior, but in 1981, the director of the Official Star Wars Fan Clubs sent a letter to all known *Star Wars* fanzines outlining rules for the usage of Lucasfilm's trademarked characters and threatening possible litigation if their demands were not met (Hale, 2005). They also stated that as long as the guidelines were followed, Lucasfilm supported fanfiction. This action brought into question whether or not fans had the right to create original stories based on copyrighted characters, whether they were being published for profit or not.

Paramount, owners of *Star Trek*, began their own crackdown on websites containing copyrighted material, in particular fan fiction sites, in the mid 1990s. Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation would take similar action in 1999 towards *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* sites.

Another significant event happened in 1992 concerning copyright protection and ownership of fan fiction. Known as the Marion Zimmer Bradley incident, the controversy began when a fan who had submitted a story to a fanzine of Bradley's work accused the author of stealing her ideas for Bradley's upcoming novel and demanded that the fan receive half the royalties and be given credit as a co-author. The publisher, in turn, refused to publish the novel. As Hale (2005) explained, "This incident is later used as justification for many professional authors for their zero tolerance policy when it comes to fan fiction." In 1998, Congress passed the Digital Millennium Copyright Act of 1998, which many of these authors use as legal justification to their opposition to fanfiction sites.

As fanfiction moved into the 1990s, it continued to be marked by the decline of the fanzines and the rise of the Usenet groups. Slash fiction first appeared on Usenet around 1990, appearing in *Star Trek* fanfiction (Hale, 2005). Coppa (2006) has pointed out, however, that internet usage was still restricted even through the mid 1990s, limiting access for many would-be writers. Access was primarily restricted to members of academic communities or to those affluent enough to afford home computers with internet service. Listservs, a primary method of dissemination of fanfiction works, were usually moderated by

someone working or studying at a university, due to the limited access of the software (Coppa, 2006). In the late 1990s, however, home computer ownership and internet access rapidly expanded, and with more and more people online, fanfiction availability and production also rapidly increased. This led to the creation of even more categories of fanfiction, including the beginnings of the often controversial real person fanfiction. Real person fanfiction consists of fictional stories written about real world personalities, usually celebrities, and sometimes has elements of slash and erotica. The Nifty Archive, a well-known archive of erotic celebrity fan fiction and boy band fiction, first came online in March 1993 (Hale, 2005).

Another relatively new category of fan fiction involved video game fan fiction. As video games became more sophisticated in the 1990s due to increasingly advanced technologies, stories about video game protagonists also began to appear. An early example was FFML, the *Final Fantasy* Mailing List, which was created on September 16, 1996 (Hale, 2005).

With the rise of usage of the internet and concern for the protection of children and others from offensive language, Congress passed the Communications Decency Act of 1996. Many fanfiction groups, in response to the law, began checking ages and implementing content rating systems on their websites and archives. Though the Supreme Court would declare the CDA unconstitutional in 1997, many of these groups would continue their ratings systems to the present day.

On October 15, 1998, Fanfiction.net, the largest fanfiction site today first went online. Representing hundreds of fandoms, Fanfiction.net quickly became the archive of choice for many. While there were other fanfiction gathering sites prior to its formation, none were as large as or offered the variety of fandom communities that it did. This also represented a shift towards forums as the major distributor of fanfiction and away from mailing lists. Forums offered a chance for readers of fanfiction to submit comments and feedback of authors' works, in a much quicker, user-friendly manner than previous technologies would allow. A detailed history of Fanfiction.net will be discussed in the next section.

The following year, another source for fanfiction came on board with the advent of LiveJournal, which represented another shift away from mailing lists, this time towards blogs and journals. Unlike Fanfiction.net, however, LiveJournal and other blog sites led to a decentralization of fan fiction communities (Hale, 2005), as these sites leant themselves to smaller writing communities. In essence, Fanfiction.net became the place to post and respond to large quantities of fanfiction, and LiveJournal and similar sites were better suited to discussing fanfiction and the source material in a smaller, more intimate environment.

July 2, 1999 brought the opening of The Fanfic Symposium (<http://www.trickster.org/symposium/>), the first known website dedicated to essays about fanfiction, rather than fanfiction itself (Hale, 2005). This site featured a variety of essays dealing with such broad topics as how to write fanfiction, criticism of fanfiction and its critics, and discussions of the politics of fanfiction. In the span of less than a decade, this site had become a starting

place for both scholars and readers of fanfiction. Unfortunately, by 2008 the site had become inactive, and many articles have disappeared from the site altogether. Other sites, such as Fanlore.org and Fan History Wiki (fanhistory.org), though dedicated to the larger domain of fandom, continue to offer articles on all practices of fandom, including a few dedicated to fanfiction. Like many internet sites, fanfiction sites are unfortunately not immune to the dynamic nature of the World Wide Web. Unlike books and journals that provide a documented record, internet data is subject to disappearing without a trace, an unfortunate side effect of the digital age that scholars need to address.

Fanfiction continued to expand into the new millennium, paralleling the expansion of the internet. Well past the era of zines dedicated primarily to fans of science fiction, there are now websites devoted to almost every media fandom that can possibly exist. As long as fanfiction exists, there will inevitably continue to be controversies concerning it. For example, on March 17, 2003, FanDomination.net, a popular fanfiction site, received a Cease & Desist order from attorneys representing professional baseball player Andy Pettitte concerning a story based on his persona. As Hale (2005) argued, this was the first time a fanfiction site had received such an order over real person fiction. Another controversy occurred in February of 2005, when the Motion Picture Association of America, citing copyrights, forced many fanfiction websites to cease using their rating system for fanfiction stories.

In spite of these controversies, however, fanfiction is poised to continue expanding and evolving along with popular culture. Though it has come a long

way from its roots with pen and paper to its digital age, the essence of fanfiction remains the same: fans of texts creating new adventures for the characters and universes they love. For composition scholars, the study of fanfiction as communities of practice offers insight into the composing processes of fanfiction writers to see what motivates writers, how they use feedback, and which types of feedback are most useful in the revision process.

#### The History of Fanfiction.net Including the *G.I. Joe* Subsite

This dissertation focuses on *G.I. Joe* fanfiction groups as communities of practice where members' interactions shape the fanfiction and the feedback itself, and where composition scholars can learn about these interactions. The two groups chosen, the *G.I. Joe* subsite of Fanfiction.net and Joe Bootcamp, represent two common types of fanfiction groups: a large, public group and a smaller, more intimate, private group. Before turning to this specific focus, it is necessary to summarize the history of the fanfiction communities being discussed within this dissertation. The purpose of this history is to show that Fanfiction.net is a large and complex organization with a sprawling membership and loyal following. It is also a prolific group that has struggled to define its boundaries in terms of content and intellectual property. The history of Fanfiction.net reveals a highly adaptive organization that is likely to continue to grow and be a part of our popular culture for the foreseeable future.

Fanfiction.net is one of the oldest sources for *G.I. Joe* fanfiction. Though there was in high probability *G.I. Joe* fanfiction prior to the founding of Fanfiction.net, there was no known centralized distributor such as found in

communities such as *Star Trek* and *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* What fanfiction there was primarily existed in small groups or homemade web pages with a very limited audience. Therefore, it can be argued that *G.I. Joe* fanfiction experienced a boom with the birth of Fanfiction.net on October 15, 1998.

Fanfiction.net was founded and is still primarily operated by Xing Li, a computer programmer based in Los Angeles, California who devotes approximately twenty-five hours a week maintaining and updating the website (Buechner, 2002). Li created the site as a place for fanfiction writers of all fandoms to post their stories and respond to other writers' works. Initially the site contained a few stories based on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, but it rapidly grew into the largest fanfiction site on the internet. Initially, writers had to declare that they were at least eighteen years of age to post fanfiction on the site, but that was eventually lowered to age thirteen. By 2002, there were 115,000 registered members of the site, with approximately one third under the age of eighteen. In addition, approximately eighty percent of members were female (Buechner, 2002).

From the beginning, posters to Fanfiction.net were able to post stories on just about any fandom, which was markedly different from other sites at the time that were usually devoted to one fandom or one category, such as science fiction. In addition, writers at Fanfiction.net weren't even restricted to just fanfiction; for a time there was even a section of the site devoted to original fiction. That section, however, was later moved to a separate website called FictionPress, which shares many similarities and rules of Fanfiction.net

Currently, Fanfiction.net is divided into nine categories, which are in turn divided into further subsections representing individual fandoms. There are separate Crossover categories, which contain stories representing more than one fandom. The nine major categories are Anime/Manga, Cartoons, Games, Movies, Books, Misc, Comics, TV Shows, and the most recent addition, Plays/Musicals. While there is a comic book, movie, and a 1980s cartoon based on *G.I. Joe*, all *G.I. Joe* fanfiction on Fanfiction.net is archived under the Cartoon category, though many fanfiction writers would argue that it would be more accurate to be archived under Comic, as the majority of stories center around the comic book continuum.

There have been some significant changes to FanFiction.net over the years. In August 2001, the Fanfiction.net website went down for over a month, causing many smaller fandoms difficulty, as they relied on the site as their primary archive of fan fiction and were temporarily left without a site to post stories (Hale, 2005). This down period represented the only extended downtime in the site's history.

An early popular section on Fanfiction.net was an area dedicated to lists, usually humorous in nature. This section was removed in April 2002, causing disappointment for some frequent posters. In September 2002, however, the biggest change occurred, as Fanfiction.net decided to no longer allow NC-17 material to be posted to the site (Hale, 2005). Many members were upset at this development and left Fanfiction.net altogether, especially those belonging to fandoms that were adult-oriented to begin with. Many of these writers now post

on AdultFanFiction.net, a similar site dedicated to adult fanfiction that was established after Fanfiction.net's decision to cease publication of adult material. Other writers, however, simply modified their stories to omit objectionable material. This decision did not eliminate adult material completely, however, as many instances can still be found, as it is largely left up to the readers to report objectionable material for deletion.

Two other important events in the history of Fanfiction.net occurred in 2005. Due to issues with potential copyright violations, Fanfiction.net banned songfics, which are fanfiction pieces that include lyrics from songs written by other composers interspersed throughout the story. In addition, other fanfiction has also been removed at the request of the authors of the source material, including requests from Anne Rice and the publishers of Archie Comics.

The other significant event involved a crackdown by the Motion Picture Association of America on unauthorized usage of its movie rating system by various internet entities, including many fanfiction websites. For many years, most fanfiction sites, including Fanfiction.net, had adopted a ratings system based on the MPAA system, even using the same G/PG/PG-13/R/NC-17 ratings. Due to concerns with copyright infringement, the MPAA sent letters of desist to multiple site owners, threatening legal action for continued use. Fanfiction.net, like many other fanfiction sites, would change its rating system in response.

Other additions to Fanfiction.net include the ability added in 2007 to report offensive reviews to the site administrator, which can cause controversy in determining what constitutes an "offensive" review. Some members have

complained that they are flagged for critical comments, while others have complained that reported reviewers are not banned from the site. Another addition was added in February 2008 that allowed writers to post in a beta-reader section of the Fanfiction.net site, which allows for critical feedback prior to posting on the main area of the site. This feature is intended to help writers improve their stories through constructive feedback prior to publication, instead of after it has been disseminated to a wider audience, a feature usually reserved for smaller communities such as Joe Bootcamp.

The *G.I. Joe* fandom on Fanfiction.net also has a relatively long history. As of September 19, 2010, there are 808 published stories, with the earliest, Teala373's "Pretty on the Inside (or The Blind Dates)," published on January 24, 2001. The longest story, at 170,991 words, is ScarlettSlipper and Alison Hart-Burnett's "My Big Fat G.I. Joe Wedding 2" published on June 15, 2007 and last updated on August 8, 2007. The shortest story belongs to Niki Hollingsworth, writing under the moniker NikiJ, and is entitled "A General's Prayer." Only 136 words, it was published on July 20, 2002. It is important to note, however, that it is impossible to get an accurate tally of the number of stories that have been uploaded to the site, as authors are free to remove their work at any point, a feature that is typical of fanfiction sites.

Though there are stories dating as early as January 2001, *G.I. Joe* fanfiction experienced a boon in late 2001 for two significant reasons. First was the introduction of a new comic book by Devil's Due in September, 2001 after a seven year hiatus. The original *G.I. Joe* comic book, published by Marvel

Comics, had a 155 issue run from 1982-1994. Though there was a short attempt at a revival with the 1996 Dark Horse comics *G.I. Joe Extreme*, the storyline had no ties to the original comic and proved unpopular, thus resulting in cancellation of the title after only four issues. Fans of the original comic had been asking for a true revival of the characters they enjoyed, and the Devil's Due series sought to fulfill that desire. With new original stories being published monthly, fans of the old series as well as first-time readers also began to actively write new *G.I. Joe* fanfiction, with many stories seeking to write fanfiction bridging the gap between the two comic book series.

The second significant event that contributed to the rise of *G.I. Joe* fanfiction was the terrorist attacks on the United States of America on September 11, 2001. With the rise of patriotism after the attacks, many Americans turned to media labeled as pro-military, a label often given to *G.I. Joe*-branded products throughout its history. Some stories of Joe fanfiction from this time dealt with G.I. Joe battling the terrorists behind the real-life attacks on America. Fanfiction served as an outlet for writers to express the anger, sadness, and confusion many people felt at that time. Interestingly, the first issue of the Devil's Due run, dated September 2001 and released days before the attacks, contains a passing reference to Osama Bin Laden as a threat to American security.

In recent years, *G.I. Joe* continues to be a popular subsite on fanfiction.net, though its popularity is not as high as it was earlier this century. It experienced another boon in 2009, however, as a new comic book appeared from IDW Publishing, as well as a feature film from Paramount Pictures, a video

game from EA Games, and an adult-oriented cartoon on Adult Swim.

Fanfiction.net continues to be the largest archive of *G. I. Joe* fanfiction on the internet, as it is especially popular for new fanfiction writers of most fandoms, partially because of its size, and also likely because it is often the first hit when searching for “fanfiction” in most internet search engines.

For the purpose of this study, *G. I. Joe* is worth investigating because of its sheer size (A Google search of “G. I. Joe” returns over 39 million hits). More interesting than size, for composition scholars, is the writing phenomena it supports. Every year, hundreds of writers post stories ranging from one hundred to one hundred seventy thousand words and numerous readers respond with comments and suggestions. My goal is to discover what types of feedback are left for these writers and how this feedback is used in the revision process, as well as how these stories and feedback contribute to the shared identity of this unique community of practice.

### The History of Joe Bootcamp

G. I. Joe Fanfic Bootcamp, commonly referred to as “Joe Bootcamp,” was formed on January 16, 2004 as a Yahoo! Group. As stated on the group’s homepage (<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/gijoeanficbootcamp/>), “GI Joe Fanfic Boot Camp is a workshop for GI Joe fanfic writers who are looking to improve their craft and to help other fanfic writers do likewise.” Not simply a place to just post fanfiction, Joe Bootcamp was created as an alternative to more mainstream fanfiction sites like Fanfiction.net that were open to the public. Here members are given writing assignments by a moderator, and both writing stories and critiquing

others' work are stated requirements for membership. While active participation was a mandatory requirement in the early days of Joe Bootcamp, and officially is still a condition of membership, this requirement has been relaxed in recent years. Many inactive writers are still listed as members on the site, and there are a few members that post and critique on only an occasional basis. Unlike Fanfiction.net, however, Joe Bootcamp tends to be less accessible for new writers of fanfiction; most Bootcamp members are experienced writers of fanfiction who have posted *G. I. Joe* stories in other fanfiction forums and have migrated from other *G. I. Joe* web communities. Many, however, remain active participants on other fan websites.

Originally, Joe Bootcamp was created and moderated by three fanfiction writers, kepulver, DesertFox, and Slayne22, though only kepulver is still listed as a member of the group. She is, however, considered an inactive member by current members, though she has continued to participate on an occasional basis. Citing a decline in participation in early 2005, the moderators considered shutting down the group and asked members if the site should continue. The members decided that the site should continue, contributing the decline in participation primarily to the holiday season. In April of 2005, however, the original owners/moderators decided to step down, citing time constraints. Member beckylblair took over as owner of the site, with amykay73 and Wolfman769 serving as moderators, though Wolfman769 has since left the group. Member Allie Faireborn, also became a moderator, helping to run the site and post assignments, and has been affectionately designated "List Mom."

In the beginning of Joe Bootcamp, the moderators posted an assignment approximately every two weeks, and members were expected to post a story by the assigned deadline. Members were then given a deadline for submitting critiques of any three members' stories. Whose story a member reviewed was entirely left up to the reviewer, though moderators would occasionally remind members to make sure everyone received reviews. Not long after, members were allowed to revise their own story in place of one of their assigned reviews. With the change in moderators, the reviewing policy was revised. Members were now assigned a specific story to review, in an attempt to make sure all members had an opportunity to receive feedback on their stories. They would then choose two additional stories to review, or they could review one story and revise their own. Assignments were also posted less frequently (approximately monthly), and the site has been known, with members' blessings, to occasionally take short hiatuses in the summer and other busy time periods.

Joe Bootcamp offers features in addition to assignments, stories, and reviews. The site also contains links to grammar and writing resources; websites devoted to *G. I. Joe*; and websites on military history and procedure, as well as a photo album where members can post *G. I. Joe*-related artwork and photographs. The site also once contained a link to an archive of *G. I. Joe* fanfiction, though that link is no longer active.

Because of the nature of the site, with members joining and leaving at will, and members no longer necessarily having to consistently participate in order to maintain membership status, it is difficult to know how many members Joe

Bootcamp has had throughout its history. This is not to suggest that writers leave Bootcamp because they find it ineffective; on the contrary, many writers have left the group because they felt the group helped them become better writers. Most members have cited time constraints or a desire to write in other fanfiction genres as their primary reason for leaving the group. Still others want more freedom to write longer stories, beyond the constraints of the assignments of Bootcamp. As of early 2008, there were twenty-nine members, including the owner and moderator. Three of those members were designated as “Bouncing,” however, which means emails from the group was being rejected by their email account, which is often a sign of an inactive member, though it can also mean their email inbox is full. In the first half of 2008, assignments averaged six participants, though the group experienced an extended hiatus during the summer months. Joe Bootcamp resumed in 2009 at a new address (<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/gjoefanfictionbootcamp2/>), with the aforementioned comic and theatrical film increasing interest in *G. I. Joe* fanfiction. The latest incarnation, with ten members, lasted throughout 2009, but has since taken another hiatus. Regardless, many current and former members have credited Joe Bootcamp as an essential element of their development as writers, and participants in this study hold hope that Bootcamp will become active again in the future.

For composition scholars, Joe Bootcamp provides an example of a community of practice where members are focused not only on creating works of Joe-based fanfiction (like on Fanfiction.net), but also on their growth as writers.

My goal is to discover why these members write fanfiction, what types of feedback they give and receive, and how that feedback helps shape their identities as writers and members of this community of practice. Because fanfiction groups are, in essence, writing groups, understanding how feedback is used and valued within these communities can, hopefully, help composition scholars see possible connections to other writing contexts. First, however, it is important to look at how fanfiction has been studied by scholars within and outside of composition studies.

#### A Survey of Scholarly Works on Fanfiction

As it has continued to increase its presence in popular culture, much has been written about fanfiction, though little research has been conducted on the role of feedback within online fanfiction groups, the focus of this dissertation. Instead, scholars have tended to focus on other significant areas of study, such as issues of identity, particularly gender roles and the closeted nature of many fanfiction writers, or legal issues, including the use of celebrities in fanfiction and copyright issues. Few studies have focused primarily on the role of feedback in fanfiction groups, and this study hopes to further that body of knowledge.

#### *Identity and Fanfiction*

One of the largest areas of study regarding fanfiction has traditionally concerned gender roles and issues of identity within fanfiction communities, particularly slash fiction. Because fanfiction is overwhelmingly composed by women, and *G.I. Joe* fanfiction is no exception, many studies have examined how fanfiction is created, shaped, and motivated by communities of women. For

instance, Clerc (1996) has argued that almost all fanfiction is written by women, and therefore media fandom would likely not exist without women. Slash fiction, she argues, is even more female-dominated and exists partially to exclude men due to differences in communication styles. Cicioni (1998), however, claimed slash fiction might represent the intimacy these women writers secretly desire in their heterosexual relationships. Green, Jenkins, and Jenkins (1998) have cautioned scholars, however, that slash writers often cite many reasons for being drawn to slash fiction. While slash fiction does exist at the *G.I. Joe* subsite at fanfiction.net, it is quite rare; no slash stories appear at Joe Bootcamp.

Lefanu (1989) argued that many women authors write science fiction because it offers freedoms unavailable in mainstream fiction. As fanfiction has its roots in science fiction fandoms, this could possibly explain the popularity of fanfiction for women writers. Bacon-Smith (1992) claimed that women often provide strong female characters in their fanfiction, something often missing from the original stories. This is evident in many Mary Sue stories, where the central character is an idealized representative of the author herself. However, Bacon-Smith pointed out that these types of stories are often criticized in fan communities when the character represents traditional feminine roles. Scodari and Felder (2000) have suggested that women's fanfiction, particularly "shipper" or relationship stories, seek to oppose male-oriented conventions. In addition, Gillilan (1999) has argued that the fanfiction stories represent the values and norms of each fan community in women-centric fiction.

The participants in this study also identify as women (real names and identities are unknown even to the author), and the role of women in fanfiction is undeniably important in understanding the communities of practice. However, this study is more interested not in how gender shapes the community, but rather how feedback is used within the fanfiction groups. The role of gender as it concerns peer response is discussed later in this chapter.

Of course, not all fanfiction is exclusively written by women, nor is it exclusively read by them either. Scholars have also been interested in how identity influences fanfiction and vice versa. Black (2009) has shown that ELL students are able to use fanfiction to construct identities and relationships across global boundaries, as well as increase familiarity with various genres they might otherwise be unfamiliar with. Using Fanfiction.net, Black studied three ELL adolescents that posted stories and received and responded to feedback in order to shape their identities not only as fanfiction writers, but also as English users.

Like many others forms of online communication, such as blogs or message boards, many fanfiction writers choose to post their stories anonymously, often using a pen name. This is certainly the case at the two sites studies in this dissertation, and all participants interviewed for this study chose to only be referred to by their online identities. This also limited the amount of personal demographic information collected, which is discussed further in the next chapter.

Some researchers argue that the proliferation of pseudonyms is due to the closeted nature of fanfiction, a practice attributed to the lack of acceptance by

mainstream society as well as academic communities. Lee (2003) has argued that writers are sometimes afraid of the reaction of other fans as well to their fanfiction, particularly slash fiction. She also points out that there is a benefit to pseudonyms, however, “because the clandestine nature of slash and fanfic in general: nobody wants to hear from Paramount with a cease-and-desist order, so nobody can make money off her work” (p. 73). With occasional questions concerning the legality of fanfiction, some writers feel the pseudonyms protect them from potential legal difficulties if the creators/copyright owners of the fictional characters did decide to persist in stopping fanfiction.

#### *Legal Issues and Fanfiction*

Another area of interest to scholars of fanfiction surrounds the legalities of fanfiction, particularly as it pertains to copyright law. Because fanfiction by its nature deals with characters, settings, and themes created and published by other authors, the question of ownership of fanfiction stories, as well as whether the act of writing fanfiction is even legal, continues to be debated. Tushnet (1997) has argued that the law must not remain neutral on the legality of fanfiction and claims that fanfiction deserves the protection of the law because it does not violate the legitimate interests of copyright owners, yet it provides “meaning and enjoyment” for the authors and readers (p. 654). Consalvo (2003) made a similar case, but she also looked at how fandoms can pose challenges to copyright owners. Jones (2003) has shown that fanfiction frequently persists, even when confronted by unsupportive studios.

One way that many writers of fanfiction have navigated around copyright issues, particularly at Fanfiction.net, is through the use of disclaimers attached to their work. A typical disclaimer, usually found at the beginning of a story, tells the readers that the author does not own the characters or settings within the story and seeks no monetary gain in relation to their fanfiction story. When possible, the original author, publisher, or copyright owner is also listed.

Another gray area concerning fanfiction and the law is the usage of real people within fanfiction stories. One genre of fanfiction that is predominantly composed by young writers is Real Person Fic (RPF), which consists of fanfiction written not about fictional characters but rather real people, usually celebrities. Boy bands such as Backstreet Boys and \*N SYNC are common targets, as are professional athletes. Many RPF stories also incorporate elements of slash fiction, which has resulted in some cease and desist orders from representatives of the celebrities, as well as a ban on all RPF stories on sites such as Fanfiction.net. Busse (2006) has argued that Real Person slash writers and readers' interactions with each other often mirror the fiction they produce.

#### *Feedback and Fanfiction*

Though there have been few studies that have explored the role of feedback within online fanfiction communities, there are two notable exceptions. Lee (2004) looked at fanfiction posted on Henneth-Annûn ([www.henneth-annun.net](http://www.henneth-annun.net)), a website devoted to fanfiction based on the works of J.R.R. Tolkien. This site allows writers to submit stories for review, and the best stories are publicly posted on the site. This site is similar to Joe Bootcamp in that stories are

required to be reviewed, but it is like Fanfiction.net in that no membership is required and anyone can read the stories posted. Lee discussed both the positive and negative comments members have expressed concerning the review process. One significant desire for many members is better advice on how to improve their stories, rather than simply a comment on how well-liked a particular story is perceived as being.

Karpovich (2006) examined the role of beta readers on fanfiction websites. Beta readers are a common term for peer responders that typically respond before the story is posted for general consumption. Karpovich claimed that beta readers are a product of fanfiction moving to online environments, as they were not in use in the age of printed fanzines. She argued that the relationship between beta readers and fan texts is a unique role, as the reader is as emotionally invested in the characters as the writer. She looked at what characteristics make good beta readers and the positive role they can play in the fanfiction writing process. She argued that the feedback received results in better drafts, a viewpoint echoed by much of the scholarship concerning peer review in the academic classroom.

Though not directly associated with feedback within fanfiction communities, other scholars have studied the effects of writing and responding to fanfiction on students' academic work. Lewis (2004) has shown that fanfiction is particularly popular with pre-teen and teenage writers, and many of these writers aren't particularly fond of their English classes. Jenkins (2004) agreed, and further argued that young writers posting and responding to fanfiction online are

developing their writing skills better than they do in the traditional classroom setting. Jenkins' findings offer support for the idea that composition scholars can look towards fanfiction groups to better understand how authors use peer response, an idea this dissertation argues for.

## A Survey of Scholarly Works on Communities of Practice

### *Origination and Terminology*

In order to view the *G.I. Joe* subsite of Fanfiction.net and Joe Bootcamp as communities of practice, it is important to offer an overview of research concerning communities of practice. The term "communities of practice" originates with Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger's (1991) *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*. This influential work described how newcomers to a group became established members as they learned the practices of the group, which they termed situated learning. Communities of practice served as the place where this learning took place and are made up of people who share a common interest and desire to contribute to and learn from the community.

Wenger (1998) further developed the concept of communities of practice in *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*. Here, Wenger abandoned the term situated learning as the key element and instead developed communities of practice as a model for a social theory of learning that was influenced by identity and practice. Under this theory, communities of practice were defined by three terms: Mutual Engagement, Joint Enterprise, and Shared Repertoire.

However, Wenger, along with Richard McDermott and William M. Snyder (2002), redefined the structure of communities of practice in his later work, using the simpler terms Domain, Community, and Practice. The authors also differentiate communities of practice from communities of interest, where members of a community share a common domain, but refrain from contributing a scope of knowledge beyond what has previously been established. This terminology, as defined in the Introduction, is the terminology used within this study. Table 1 offers an overview of the structure of communities of practice.

Table 1: *Structure of Communities of Practice*

Term	Definition
Domain	An area of interest that brings a group of people together. Creates common ground and a sense of common identity.
Community	The group united by the domain. Fosters interactions based on mutual respect and trust and encourages a willingness to share ideas.
Practice	The knowledge, methods, stories, documents, etc. developed by the community.

While originally focused on the field of knowledge management, communities of practice have become influential in other fields, including composition studies. Brown and Duguid (1991) offered an early look at how communities of practice offer organizations a place not only to learn, but also to innovate, which increases the status of the organization.

### *In Composition Studies*

The application of communities of practice in composition studies has its roots in both Gere's (1987) concept of writing groups and Gee's (1990) concept of discourse communities. Writing groups, as defined by Gere, involve groups of writers who voluntarily come together to write and respond to each other's work, much like the fanfiction groups studied within this dissertation. By their nature, successful writing groups are also communities of practice, as they are brought together for a common purpose (domain), establish the group (community), and write and respond to each other's writing (practice).

Gee (1990) argued that members of a community must learn the Discourses of the community in order to become established and accepted members, which parallels Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of situated learning, the root of communities of practice. Though separate theoretical terms, it can be argued that discourse communities are a type of community of practice, and communities of practice, are, essentially, also discourse communities. In both settings, members do not automatically become full participants within the community; instead, members must learn the established norms and practices, referred to by Gee as Discourses and Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002) as Practices, before they become full members. This is certainly true within fanfiction groups. At the *G.I. Joe* subsite of Fanfiction.net, new visitors to the group tend to first only read stories for their own entertainment (often referred to as "lurkers" in the discourse of the community), then respond to other authors' stories, and, finally, post their own stories on the site. Only after members are

confident in the practices or Discourses of the community do they post their responses and stories. At Joe Bootcamp, all members are required to post both stories and responses upon joining, but that does not mean they don't still first learn the Discourses or practices of the community. Unlike Fanfiction.net, which often serves as members' first experiences with fanfiction, Joe Bootcamp members have already become familiar with fanfiction at other sites and have a basic understanding of the practices of Joe Bootcamp. Their understanding of those practices is further refined after joining, and the negotiation of the community's practices has sometimes served as a point of conflict between members of the group, which is discussed further in chapter five of this dissertation.

Tu (2002) has shown how social presence in online learning communities affects how much members participate in communities of practice. As with Gee's Discourse communities, Tu found that the more established a member is in the social structure, the more likely he or she is to participate within the community. This is important to remember when evaluating online fanfiction communities of practice, as members who have not established a social presence are less likely to fully participate within the community of practice.

Though there are parallels between discourse communities and communities of practice, Gee (2005) has shied away from the term "communities of practice," due to what he has seen as a limitation of the concept. He has argued that communities of practice focus too highly on membership in a community, rather than on the "idea of a space in which people interact" (p. 214).

Instead, Gee offered the term “affinity spaces” as an alternative to the communities of practice model.

David Barton and Karin Tusting’s edited collection, *Beyond Communities of Practice: Language, Power and Social Context* (2005), which Gee’s (2005) article appears in, has attempted to both recognize the value of communities of practice, while also showing the limitations of the theory, particularly as it relates to language studies, as they have argued that proponents of communities of practice often ignore the broader social context that the communities of practice reside in, possibly ignoring outside social influencers on the communities of practice. Barton and Tusting, like many scholars in both language studies and composition studies, have focused on communities of practice primarily through the lens of Lave and Wenger’s (1991) situated learning or Wenger’s (1998) concepts of Mutual Engagement, Joint Enterprise, and Shared Repertoire. While these are useful terms, Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder’s (2002) revised concept of communities of practice, comprised of Domain, Community, and Practice, better addresses the broader social context, and using this view of communities of practice offers scholars a different theoretical lens.

Geller, Eodice, Condon, Carroll, and Boquet (2007) have offered a view of writing centers as communities of practice, and they have shown how viewing writing centers through that theoretical lens can show both how writing centers successfully operate, as well as how writing centers need to adapt to address the needs of both the members of the community who work and participate in the center, as well as the needs of the community which it serves. This offers

evidence to the importance of looking at fanfiction and other writing groups as communities of practice, because writing centers do much of the same work as fanfiction communities, particularly groups such as Joe Bootcamp that are focused on helping authors become better writers. Writing centers, after all, focus largely on offering feedback to writers to help them improve their writing skills; feedback is also an essential element of fanfiction groups and the primary focus of this study.

#### A Survey of Scholarly Works on Peer Response

To understand how fanfiction writers use peer response within their community of practice to revise their work, it is important to see how composition scholars have positioned peer response within the discipline. Though these communities of practice are by nature different than freshman composition classes, they are (particularly Joe Bootcamp) similar to Elbow's (1973) teacherless writing class, as previously discussed. Elbow was one of the first proponents of reader-based feedback, the type of feedback often offered within fanfiction communities.

#### *Classroom-Based Peer Review*

Integral components of many writing classes, particularly process-based freshman composition courses, such as Elbow's, are some form of peer review sessions designed to help students help each other to improve their drafts. Peer review sessions are also a required element of the Joe Bootcamp fanfiction group, which distinguishes that site from other fanfiction sites such as Fanfiction.net. As stated in the introduction to this dissertation, however, peer

review sessions in composition courses have had mixed results, with many instructors and students finding themselves frustrated with what often seems to be a forced process that provides few helpful suggestions for revision of student papers. However, many of these perceived failures of peer review could also be attributed to faulty assumptions of writing teachers. For instance, Simmons (2003) has argued that problems with peer review often manifest because students are often not taught how to respond to papers and are not experienced enough to offer thoughtful, helpful advice to their peers, a process that takes years to develop. Simmons studied peer response among students at four high schools and found that academic achievement had little effect on students' ability to respond to their peers' drafts. He argued that teachers cannot just tell students how they want them to respond and expect the students to be successful responders; instead, he recommends that students need frequent experience responding to one another's drafts and teachers should model successful peer review for their students. Student authors also don't always know what types of feedback will best help them to revise their own work, so peer review can often be frustrating for student authors and responders. Of course, many of these same problems also exist in fanfiction communities. At Joe Bootcamp, participants in this dissertation's study echoed many of the frustrations of students and teachers in Simmons' experiment, such as an overabundance of comments focusing on simplistic, positive comments that offer little value for revision, comments that both Simmons and participants in this dissertation labeled as "cheerleading." As part of his research, Simmons developed

categories of peer response, based on the types of feedback often given by both inexperienced and experienced writers. Because these terms also describe the types of feedback I have often come across while reading fanfiction online, I have adopted these terms for this study. These categories of feedback are discussed further in the next chapter.

Like Simmons, VanDeWeghe (2004) has argued that writing teachers often have faulty assumptions concerning peer review in the classroom. He argued that many teachers believe that advanced students should naturally have the skills to be successful peer reviewers, that the instructor telling the students to focus on content will ensure they do, and that students should be able to successfully peer review after a few writing workshops from the teacher.

VanDeWeghe claimed that these assumptions are faulty because:

The ability to give appropriate feedback to other writers is a learned set of strategies and skills that all developing writers must be taught ....

Students need to experience quality ways of responding firsthand, not just be told about them.... [and] I know of no standard time frame in which students become better responders. (p. 95)

He argued teachers need to train all students to be better responders by teaching higher-order response, a process that involves modeling of preferred response techniques and teacher participation in peer response sessions. Harris (1992) claimed that classroom teachers often fail to differentiate between peer response and tutoring sessions, such as those found in writing centers. She argues that both can be important resources for student writers, but teachers must

understand the benefits and limitations of each. Min (2005) has offered a training process that focuses on teaching peer responders to identify specific areas for improvement rather than generalizations on the quality of drafts. Of course, part of the problems writing teachers face might also be attributed to their own assumptions of what types of feedback authors should value, an assumption I also have had that has been challenged by the findings of this dissertation. While many authors do seek to improve their writing ability, as do members of Joe Bootcamp, writing teachers must also be careful not to overgeneralize the desires of students during peer review. Not all writers seek constructive feedback on their papers, and many writers are motivated by positive comments, no matter how simplistic those comments might be, as evidenced by the comments desired by fanfiction authors at Fanfiction.net. Perhaps viewing writing classrooms as communities of practice might help teachers discover possible confictions between the teacher's idea of peer review and the ideas of the students, thus helping instructors negotiate those differences and creating better models for classroom peer review that both the teacher and the students can fully commit to.

Though classroom peer review offers many challenges, there are many benefits to it, many of which are also common to peer review in fanfiction groups. Murray (2004), for example, has argued that "the reading of writing in process is a sophisticated kind of reading, but it can be learned as a community of writers share their reading of each others' drafts" (p. 188). By giving and receiving feedback, as awkward and shallow as it might be, students learn to see drafts progress from early, rough drafts to finished, polished products. Students learn to

revise not only through the comments and suggestions they receive, but also by being able to recognize potential for change and growth in the papers that they read. Bishop (2001) further argued that sharing texts allows students the chance to develop a “wider sense of possibility” for their texts, as well as a chance to disclose, reflect, examine, and better judge their own work, opportunities she feared may be lost in the classrooms of post-process scholars. (p. 76). This echoes Wenger’s (1998) idea of communities of practice being “about content—about learning as a living experience of negotiating meaning—not about form” (p. 229). Fanfiction communities, as communities of practice, echo many of the benefits Murray and Bishop illustrate. Through the exchange of feedback, particularly at Joe Bootcamp, authors are able to develop their ideas more clearly and improve their texts by shaping their stories to meet the needs of themselves and their audience, fellow fans of the characters they are writing about. Sharing stories with other fans has led many of the participants in this study to expand their writing interests, and their improvement as writers was cited by many members as a reason for the decline of the Joe Bootcamp; feedback from the group had, in essence, helped them “outgrow” the group.

Like Murray and Bishop, Paton (2002) has cautioned that classroom instructors must “establish a positive but realistic attitude toward the process” (p. 291) of peer review. Recognizing that peer review is not a magic process always resulting in better papers, she suggests students and teachers focus on the benefits of peer response, which includes exposing students to a variety of forms and techniques and the ability to see what is and isn’t working within a draft.

Another benefit of peer review, as shown by Singh-Gupta and Troutt-Ervin (1996), is preparation for teamwork and problem-solving skills that will be essential for many students in their post-academic careers. These, too, are benefits that also hold true for fanfiction groups, as authors and responders negotiate conflicts and differences, skills that can also be applied to other communities of practice, such as the workplace.

Regardless of the benefits of peer review, many instructors struggle with negotiating their own role in classroom peer review, a problem often shared by moderators of fanfiction groups. Moderators of fanfiction groups take on different roles depending on the group. At sites like fanfiction.net, moderators tend to be more hands-off and exist primarily to remove members who post objectionable material and negotiate disputes between members. Rarely do they actually post or respond to stories on the site. At more intimate sites like Joe Bootcamp, however, moderators are also active participants, charged with negotiating conflict, posting assignments, addressing questions from newcomers, and otherwise keeping the group running smoothly. They must be careful, though, that their vision does not override the desires of the group, lest they unintentionally prevent members from feeling they can respond openly and honestly to drafts, or they create the illusion that their responses are better than other's.

Miller (2002) struggled with implementing peer review in the classroom early in her teaching career, as students would not only be reluctant to offer constructive feedback, but even when feedback was offered, students were

hesitant to revise based on their peers' suggestions, deferring instead to the suggestions offered by the teacher, a problem other scholars, such as Engbers (2009), have also experienced. Therefore, Miller has recommended the instructor participate in peer review through group conferences, being careful to limit the role of the teacher from dominating the discussion of the draft. Murray (2004) echoed this strategy, lest teachers run the risk of minimizing peer response. By modeling successful peer review, students also gain the advantage of becoming better peer responders. Lawrence and Sommers (1996) argued that to be successful, teachers must be "willing to make a commitment to group work through careful training, supervision, modeling, and sequencing of classroom activities for an appropriate assignment" (p. 108). As Wenger claimed in regards to communities of practice, "designing for learning cannot be based on a division of labor between learners and nonlearners, between those who organize learning and those who realize it, or between those who create meaning and those who execute it" (p. 234). Teachers, then, must be careful not to dominate peer review, and moderators of fanfiction communities must make sure they do not dominate the sharing of meaning within the fanfiction group.

Gender also plays a significant role in peer response, both in the classroom and in fanfiction groups. Styslinger (1999) argued that male and female writers tend to respond to their peers' drafts in distinctively different manners. Female writers and responders, she claims, focus on content and ask prodding questions to elicit comment about the draft. Male responders, on the other hand, have minimal responses and focus on functional and editorial

responses, usually concerning grammar and mechanics. Styslinger argued that female writers often dominate peer review workshops, whereas male writers tend to prefer solitary, work-alone approaches to revision. Tomlinson (2009) echoed this conclusion, though in her study, she found that males tend to give more feedback in all-male groups than in mixed-gender peer response groups. This could be one reason why fanfiction, particularly on the internet, is significantly dominated by female writers. Since most fanfiction websites, including Fanfiction.net and Joe Bootcamp, offer some form for commenting on stories, male writers could be reluctant to post stories in public or semi-private forums.

#### *Online Peer Review*

Of course, this study focuses on peer response in online environments, specifically in online fanfiction communities. While there are similarities between traditional classroom peer review and online peer review, there are also unique differences. For instance, Pagnucci and Mauriello (1999) have also shown how gender affects feedback, but their focus was on online environments. In a case study where authors of papers had the option of using pseudonyms when posting their papers online for feedback, authors who used gender-neutral pseudonyms received the most feedback, and authors that used female names received the least. Also, female students were less likely to use their real names in the study. In addition, while some females chose to use male pseudonyms, none of the males used female pseudonyms, indicating the possibility that female students believe they will have more credibility using a male name. Of course, the use of pseudonyms are one difference online peer review groups can offer over

traditional face to face peer review, though not all peer response groups incorporate their usage. In its history, Joe Bootcamp has had only a couple of members that have identified as male. One of these, in particular, was cited by multiple participants in this study as being overbearing and bossy, and both participants expressed a reluctance to work with that member because of his personality. He eventually left the group completely. Of course, as discussed previously in this dissertation, it is often difficult to know true demographic information about participants in online communities, particularly when participants are only known through the use of a screen name or pseudonym. Pagnucci and Mauriello's research is important to this study, however, as it shows how males and females perceive male, female, and gender-neutral pseudonyms, which could possibly affect the amounts and types of feedback members of fanfiction communities receive.

Besides gender, there are also other significant differences between face-to-face and online peer response. Olson-Horswill (2002) has argued that online writing groups, a hallmark of her English 101 classes, "can be even more interactive and personal than in a traditional classroom" (p. 188), a notion that Peckham (1996) has claimed composition teachers have been reluctant to adopt. Peckham cautioned that while computer-mediated peer review was inevitable, instructors should be cautious that they don't overlook the benefits of traditional face to face peer review and that they are able to recognize the possible disruptions that it can cause. However, Orson-Horswill claimed that online writing groups free students from the restrictions of a typical classroom, such as time

constraints, allowing them to focus more freely on each others' work, resulting in better revisions. One of the benefits members of fanfiction groups cite is that members can read and respond from home, and they do not usually feel rushed to respond to their peers drafts, though sometimes in more structured settings such as Joe Bootcamp, time constraints are still a factor in members' participation levels.

In addition to the freedom of being able to respond outside the constraints of a weekly class meeting, Hewett (2000) found that students in computer-mediated peer response groups tend to use more peer ideas in their revisions than face-to-face peer response groups do, though the latter tend to use more self-generated revision ideas. This could indicate that members of online fan fiction communities, which are by nature computer-mediated, are more likely to also use the ideas of their peers when revising their fan fiction stories. For instance, at Fanfiction.net, where many members are motivated by positive encouragement from their peers, authors often ask for suggestions from their responders to continue an in-progress story or write a new one. Crank's (2002) research supports Hewett's assertion, as Crank found that online peer response done through email exchange is less threatening than face to face peer response for both the author and responders, resulting in more fully-developed, honest feedback that promotes better revisions.

Though there are certainly differences between face-to-face and online peer review, there are also significant differences between different methods of online peer response. Though both synchronous and asynchronous peer

response have advantages and disadvantages, many researchers have found that asynchronous peer response, the type most commonly found in fanfiction communities, often results in better peer response. Crank's (2002) research on peer review through email is consistent with that of Honeycutt (2001), who found peer response through email is preferred over synchronous peer response, whether online or face-to-face, often because responders are less pressured to not hurt an author's feelings and less constrained by time or other logistical issues. Though peer response at fanfiction groups such as the ones studied in this dissertation is not done through email, it is asynchronous, and participants cited that they felt this type of communication resulted in more honest feedback.

Liang (2010) has also found problems with synchronous online peer response. Studying three small EFL peer response groups, she discovered that social talk and task management predominated, and meaning negotiation and error correction seldom occurred. Her research suggested that synchronous peer response can only be successful with proactive modeling, scaffolding, and support from experienced writing instructors. Though some fanfiction groups, such as Joe Bootcamp, have experimented with synchronous peer response through instant messaging programs, many members have found asynchronous communication to be a better model for peer response for many of the same reasons that Liang cites.

Strasma (2009) has argued that students in first-year writing courses benefit from peer review, particularly when done digitally. He uses a technique he terms "spotlighting," where a small group of students for each assignment submit

their papers to an online environment such as Blackboard, and the whole class offer thorough critiques of the paper. Modeled after the blind-review processes of scholarly journals, Strasma has claimed this technique benefits the students better than traditional face to face peer review. This model for peer review resembles the type of peer response that the Joe Bootcamp group uses in that all stories posted to Bootcamp are available for the entire group to peruse, as well as the comments left by the responders. By being able to examine how other responders have critiqued a particular story, all members can compare how they respond to papers to the other members. Like Strasma found, participants can become better peer responders by seeing how others view and respond to the same work.

By exploring how peer response is used at Fanfiction.net and Joe Bootcamp, I hope to gain insight into how peer review contributes to the revision process and the shared identity of these communities of practice, as well as whether insights learned might be implemented into the composition classroom. Though many scholars recommend teacher interaction during peer review in the classroom, it will be interesting to see how and if peer review is successful when there is no formal teacher, as is the case in both online fanfiction groups, and whether it might be possible for the teacher to serve more as a moderator of successful peer review. As I have tried to show, there are many similarities to how peer review is used in classroom settings and fanfiction communities. By seeing how members of fanfiction communities use and value feedback, I hope to offer composition teachers an opportunity to reflect upon their own peer

response practices to determine whether lessons gleaned from fanfiction communities might improve the feedback process for their students.

## CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

### Overview of the Study

This study attempts to show how members of two online fanfiction communities of practice, the *G.I. Joe* subsite of Fanfiction.net and Joe Bootcamp, are motivated to write fanfiction, give and receive feedback, and use that feedback in the writing process. This study is primarily focused on the following research questions:

1. How do participants experience the fanfiction community?
2. What types of feedback do authors give? How does feedback impact the community?
3. How do authors react to different types of feedback? Do they consider certain types of feedback more helpful than others?

Before addressing these research questions in depth, however, it is important to situate these fanfiction groups as communities of practice, as viewing fanfiction communities as communities of practice offers insight into how each group uses feedback. As will be shown, the use of feedback varies considerably for each fanfiction group.

#### *The G.I. Joe Subsite of Fanfiction.net as a Community of Practice*

According to Wenger (2004), communities of practice can be assessed by evaluating them according to three integral components: the domain, the community, and the practice. For a particular community of practice to be successful, all three components must be present. The domain represents an area of interest that brings a group of people together, who in turn form a

community. The works, practices, stories, documents, and tools that the community produces are referred to as practices, and it is these practices that separate communities of practice from what Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002) termed “communities of interest” (p. 43). While many fan-oriented websites offer places for fans to discuss a particular fandom, these sites would be more aptly labeled communities of interest. Fanfiction sites, on the other hand, also offer fans of a particular fandom, such as *G.I. Joe*, to produce, share, and respond to fanfiction stories that not only increase the community’s enjoyment of the fandom’s original characters and settings, but also expand upon and shape the very domain that brought the community together in the first place.

Fanfiction.net is unique in that unlike most fanfiction sites, it is not solely dedicated to one fandom, as it serves hundreds of different fan groups. It can, however, be viewed as a community of practice on a macro level, as an interest in fanfiction can serve as the domain that brings a community together. However, since few, if any, members will write for every fandom of fanfiction that Fanfiction.net serves, it is more appropriate to view Fanfiction.net as a host for multiple communities of practice that might have an overlap of members. Therefore, this study is concerned only with the *G.I. Joe* subsection of Fanfiction.net.

The *G.I. Joe* subsite of Fanfiction.net is, according to the participants of this study, often many Joe fans’ go-to site for reading fanfiction. While there are many websites that are dedicated to *G.I. Joe*, only a handful offer fanfiction opportunities. Instead, most of these fan sites point to Fanfiction.net as the place

to write and share fanfiction stories. In fact, some sites can even be hostile towards fanfiction groups. As GI Jaye, a participant in this study, points out, not all members of a fandom look highly upon fanfiction; some fans have disdain for fanfiction authors, particularly if authors take creative liberties with established characterizations or relationships.

Because Fanfiction.net is the largest archive of Joe fanfiction, it is also where many authors first post their stories. The domain of this community is twofold: members are united both by their interest in *G.I. Joe* and their interest in fanfiction. While not all members of this community actually post stories to the site, they may also contribute to the community through their responses to the posted fanfiction stories, allowing feedback for the members who do post to the site. Many future authors begin by first reading fanfiction stories, then posting comments, and then, finally, sharing their own stories on the site. One comment to a story analyzed for this study alluded to this practice, as the responder noted, “Perhaps you’ve gone past the ‘reading only’ mode? Hmm? Time to graduate to joining us in the writers’ ranks?” This “graduation” represents Gee’s (1990) concept of how membership in a Discourse community forms.

Both the stories and the responses are vital to the fanfiction community, and oftentimes the author will also respond to the feedback left by the responder, as well as incorporate the feedback into revision of the work. How the author uses the feedback, however, is left up to the individual author. By examining the *G.I. Joe* subsite of Fanfiction.net as a community of practice, one can see how feedback plays an integral role in the practices of the community.

### *Joe Bootcamp as a Community of Practice*

Joe Bootcamp differs from the *G.I. Joe* subsite of Fanfiction.net in a number of key ways, particularly when evaluating it as a community of practice. The most significant difference involves the domain. While both communities center around fanfiction and both share many of the same members, they are distinctly different when it comes to the primary focus of the domain. As stated earlier, the domain for the subsite of Fanfiction.net is both an interest in fanfiction and an interest in the *G.I. Joe* fandom. This dual focus is evident in the practices of the community, as well as in the types of feedback posted by responders. While the members of Joe Bootcamp are also interested in both fanfiction and the fandom, the domain, as well as the practices, of this community of practice differs from the Fanfiction.net subsite. At Bootcamp, the members are not only interested in producing *G.I. Joe* fanfiction; instead, their primary focus seems to be on becoming better writers, and *G.I. Joe* serves as the common medium for members to use to help accomplish that task. The members of Bootcamp are certainly fans of *G.I. Joe*, as reflected in the stories they produce, but the chosen fandom serves more as a means to challenge one another to become better writers. This is evident in the description listed on the group's homepage (<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/gijoeanficbootcamp/>):

GI Joe Fanfic Boot Camp is a workshop for GI Joe fanfic writers who are looking to improve their craft and to help other fanfic writers do likewise. Every two weeks, members of the group are given a writing assignment, which they then complete and submit for critiques from the rest of the

group. Participation, both in writing and critiquing are mandatory. If you're interested in joining, drop us a line!

Because the domain is quite different at Joe Bootcamp by members focusing foremost on improving their writing skills rather than on keeping the fandom alive, one can expect the types of feedback left by responders to also be quite different. This expectation is based in part on the practices of the members of the community. At Bootcamp, unlike Fanfiction.net, all members must agree to not only read and respond to stories, but to also write stories for the community. Whereas a person interested in reading *G. I. Joe* fanfiction can peruse Fanfiction.net at will and comment if he or she is so moved, Joe Bootcamp is restricted to those who also agree to contribute their own original stories to the community. That said, Joe Bootcamp does not restrict community members from sharing their stories at other sites, including Fanfiction.net. For many of the members of Bootcamp, Bootcamp provides a great place to get feedback on stories that will eventually be revised and posted at other sites. Though quite different from the Fanfiction.net subsite, Joe Bootcamp, when active, remains a vibrant, complex community of practice.

### Overview of Methods

For this study, I used a multi-faceted approach to data collection, including the use of textual analysis and interviews. Over the course of summer and fall 2010, I examined twenty stories from each fanfiction group, as well as the feedback posted for each story. Textual analysis of the feedback given is vital in discovering what types of feedbacks are posted by responders and which seem

to be most helpful during the revision process of fanfiction authors, as well as what types of feedback are most valued by authors and responders. I also interviewed six current and former members of Joe Bootcamp, all of whom have also posted at the *G.I. Joe* subsite of Fanfiction.net. These interviews were conducted through a series of email exchanges throughout late summer and fall 2010. Interviews offer additional insight on how writers use this feedback, as well as provide insight into the motivations of fanfiction writers to produce fanfiction and share that fanfiction with virtual strangers in an online fan-centered environment. Each method will be discussed more fully in the following sections. Table 2 offers an overview of how each method addresses the research questions.

Table 2: *Research Methods*

Research Question	Method Used to Address
1: How do participants experience the fanfiction community?	Interviews
2: What types of feedback do authors give? How does the feedback impact the community?	Textual Analysis
3: How do authors react to different types of feedback? Do they consider certain types of feedback more helpful than others?	Textual Analysis, Interviews

### Textual Analysis

Textual analysis of both fanfiction stories and the feedback posted for each story is of vital importance to understanding what types of feedback members of fanfiction communities tend to post for one another, as well as how

authors use those responses to revise their drafts. In order to see how peer feedback is used and valued by fanfiction authors and responders, I collected and analyzed feedback from the *G.I. Joe* subsection of Fanfiction.net and Joe Bootcamp, two very different fanfiction websites. In order to have a sizable data pool of fanfiction stories to examine, this study analyzes the feedback posted by responders for twenty stories, ranging in length from 700 to 4000 words, from each of the two fanfiction websites. Stories were chosen to represent stories written by participants in this study, as well as stories written by other authors. In order to ensure that there would be enough data to analyze, stories that did not have at least two feedback comments were excluded. Data was then coded according to the following system, in order to examine what types of feedback are most often posted for fanfiction authors in both communities, as well how feedback differs between the two fanfiction groups.

### *Coding System*

This study utilizes a modified version of the categories of feedback posited by Jay Simmons (2003) in his research on feedback given by high school and college writing students discussed in chapter two of this dissertation. Simmons researched the types of feedback given by students with varying experience levels with peer response and classified the feedback into the following categories: Global Praise, Personal Response, Text Playback, Sentence Edits, Word Edits, Reader's Needs, and Writer's Strategies. I chose to use Simmons' categories because they provide apt descriptions of the types of feedback seen in both communities, as well as in my own experience with peer response.

Simmons' categories provide an applicable system, because like the varying experience levels of his students, the fanfiction communities being studied in this dissertation also represent varying degrees of experience and training concerning peer response. As Gee (1999) has shown, newcomers to a group must learn the discourse of the group in order to become fully established members. Members of communities of practice, like the fanfiction communities discussed here, similarly must learn the practices of a community in order to participate fully. In Simmons's study, inexperienced peer reviewers were more likely to give general, or global, responses, and experienced reviewers tended to give more constructive, critical advice. Simmons argued that successful peer review takes time, because reviewers must learn how to give better feedback. Therefore, it seems likely that inexperienced peer reviewers in fanfiction communities might also give less helpful feedback. While there are undoubtedly other coding systems that could be used, Simmons' categories largely represent the types of feedback I have noted in my own study of fanfiction sites, and Simmons' categories provide an applicable system for the purposes of this study, with a couple modifications.

Global Praise describes comments intended to make the writer feel good about their work, whether the work merits praise or not. These comments include statements such as "This is good" that might make the author feel good but offer little or no reasons for why the reader found the work to be "good" and offer no suggestions for improving the text. As Simmons pointed out, Graves (1983) noted that these are the comments inexperienced responders usually focus on.

Personal Responses, based in part on Straub's (1997) interpretation of Rosenblatt's (1938) term Reader-Response, are feedback that focuses on the psychological involvement of the author as a person, rather than the author as the author of the piece. With these comments, readers make assumptions about the author's state of mind rather than responding to what is actually written. Comments such as, "Man, what have u been sniffing?!" or "You seem obsessed with love stories" are examples of Personal Responses. These comments deflect from the written word to the psychological makeup of the author, which offers little useful feedback for the revision process itself.

Text Playback are comments that focus on the ideas or organization of the text, usually focused on the text as a whole. These comments show how or why the text is effective or not. Comments such as "I like the ending, it really sums up the story quite nicely" and "I really liked the way you built up the suspense...it kept me guessing!" are examples of Text Playback.

Sentence Edits are comments that focus on sentence-level grammatical errors, such as fragments, run-on sentences, tense shifts, etc. Similarly, Word Edits are comments focused on word-level errors, such as spelling problems or word choice issues. While Sentence Edits and Word Edits offer constructive feedback for editing a writer's work, they offer little insight into revising the piece. Inexperienced peer reviewers are often drawn to Sentence and Word Edits, as they are often easy to spot and run little risk of hurting the writer's feelings, as they are concerned with the mechanics of the piece rather than the ideas or insights of the author.

Finally, Reader's Needs are comments that focus on the needs or reactions of the reader, comments that satisfy the reader's desire for information. Simmons labeled these types of comments Reader's Needs, borrowing from Flower's (1979) concept of "reader-based prose," as they address a reaction to the text from the reader's personal connection and experience. These connections (or lack thereof) are important in showing the author to what extent their text creates meaning for the reader, as well as how to revise the piece to strengthen that connection. Comments such as "There is a lot to process in this scene—it left me a bit confused. Who were the heroes and who were the villains? I need more explanation!" and "You really had me emotionally invested in Scarlett's struggle. I could feel her pain and it reminded me of my own feelings of loss" are examples of Reader's Needs, as they focus on how the responder reacted to the author's story. For many writers, these comments are the most helpful in revising a piece. I have eliminated Simmons' category of Writer's Strategies, as it overlaps with his category of Reader's Needs because it is impossible to detect what an author's intended strategies are outside of the responder's own interpretation, therefore making it difficult to apply for purposes of this study.

While Simmons' categories of feedback offer a system to also categorize feedback given in online writing communities, I have added an additional category based on my experience reading comments left on Fanfiction.net, as well as my experiences observing students during peer review sessions in my composition classes. One additional type of feedback that is sometimes left,

though rare, does not fit into Simmons' categories: comments that offer general, negative feedback such as "I don't like it" or "This sucks!" These comments serve as a complement to Simmons' category of Global Praise. Like Global Praise, these comments offer little, if any, constructive feedback for improving the draft, and instead consist of a simplistic, emotional response that does not provide reasons for their conclusion. Unlike Global Praise, however, these comments serve not to make the author feel good, but instead are often used to make the writer feel bad or sometimes, particularly on open-forum sites like Fanfiction.net, serve to insult or embarrass a rival author. For purposes of this study, I have labeled these comments Global Criticism. Table 3 offers a summation of the coding system.

Table 3: *Coding System*

Type of Response	Description	Example
Global Praise (GP)	General, positive comments about whole work	"This was great :)"
Global Criticism (GC)	General, negative comments about whole work	"This sucks!"
Personal Responses (PR)	Comments on mindset of writer	"You are obsessed with love stories!"
Text Playback (TP)	Comments on ideas or organization of text	"You have a good underlying plot...needs elaboration"
Sentence Edits (SE)	Comments on sentence-level grammar	Fragments, run-ons, comma usage, etc.
Word Edits (WE)	Comments on word-level grammar	Spelling errors, word choice, etc.
Reader's Needs (RN)	Comments focusing on needs or reactions of the reader	"I can feel so much emotion in this piece" "I'm having trouble understanding."

## Textual Analysis in Practice

In order to better understand how data was collected and analyzed, I will now return to the fanfiction story authored by participant Allie Faireborne and responded to by participant GI Jaye discussed in the introduction to this study. GI Jaye's comments remain italicized, and my own comments and analysis appear in bold:

*Overall, I think it has potential for a good story. Some of the sentences/ phrasing were a bit awkward or unclear **SE/WE (these comments describe grammatical issues, though they aren't very specific)**, but I think you have a good underlying plot. **TP (focuses on the text as a whole)** I would like to see a bit more elaboration on why Hawk thought this was necessary, etc. **RN (these comments address GI Jaye's desires for the text)** I think it could be an explanation that fits in well with what we've seen in spoilers of the relaunch.*

Hawk rolled into the new Joe base. It had been a year since the team disbanded and now they had been reformed just a month ago. *(This is sort of awkward, Is there a way to split it or rephrase it? Maybe, "The team had reformed just a month ago after a one year disbandment".)***SE (addresses sentence-level grammar)** 'Everything looks different,' he thought to himself. It had been a year since anyone on the team had seen him. He disappeared and didn't even go to the funeral of the Joe he felt the closest to. But he

had his reasons and today they would find out why and when they do one man will probably never forgive him again. *(This sentence runs on. Can you split it into two?)***SE**

Scarlett opened the door to the room that the new Joe team was meeting in. "Hawk?" She asked in disbelief as she watched her ex-CO come down the hall towards her in his wheelchair.

"Yes Scarlett." Hawk said as he plastered a fake smile on his lips. Truth was he was nervous as hell for what he was about to do. "I need to talk to everyone in that room."

"Y...yes of course sir." Scarlett said and opened the door for him.

Hawk rolled in to see Storm Shadow. He knew that he was now part of the team and supposedly reformed, but he still wasn't so sure. There were also Roadblock, Snake Eyes, Duke, and the one he was the most nervous about, Flint. *(This is in a passive voice. It will flow more smoothly if you put something like, "Roadblock, Snake-eyes, Duke, and Flint- the one he was most nervous about- were also there.)* **WE (though this revises the sentence, it is essentially a problem with word choice, so it is labeled as WE instead of SE)** They all looked at him with a look that was the mixture of questioning and shock. "Hello Joes."  
*(Instead of using looked twice, maybe "They all stared..." or "looked at him with a mixture of..."***WE**

“Hawk?” Duke asked still in shock. “Where the hell have you been?”

Hawk raised his hand to silence everyone else. “Let me tell you all what I came to say.” He looked right at Flint and froze for a moment, worried about everyone’s reactions, but Flint’s the most. “Lady Jaye...Alison...is alive.”

Flint’s face turned beet red. “What the hell are you talking about? I buried her a year ago. This isn’t funny!!!!”

Hawk knew this wasn’t going to be easy. He opened up the black leather briefcase that was on his lap and took out several recent pictures of Lady Jaye, tossing them on the table in front of him. “As you can see Dash, she is very much alive. I’ve kept her in hiding for the past year.”

“She’s alive and you didn’t fucking tell me about it?!?” Flint roared as he stood up and slammed both his fists on the mahogany table. “Where the hell is she?!?” *Nice pissed off Flint image. RN*  
**(this is a reaction by the responder)**

“Calm down Dash.” Roadblock said as he put his big hand on Flint’s shoulder. *(I’m glad someone is calming him. Maybe some more reaction from others here?)RN*

“Let me start from the beginning,” Hawk said. “When they captured you after running you off the road Alison was still alive. She was rushed to the hospital and operated on. But the Red

*Shadows (No apostrophe.)* **WE** tried three times to kill her in the hospital. I made it look like she did die and moved her to a cabin I have that no one else knows about. *(Maybe just say a secluded or secret cabin. If Hawk's kept his cabin a secret for this long would he so easily admit that it's his when he doesn't have to?)* **WE** She woke up right before they got you back, Dash, *(From where? The wreck?)* **RN (this comment addresses confusion on the part of the responder)** but she couldn't remember anything. To keep her safe no one could know she was alive, including you." *(Can you elaborate?)* **RN (the responder desires more from the author)**

"Then why come back now to tell us? Is she asking for Flint?" Scarlett asked, still in shock that her best friend was alive.

"No." Hawk said sadly as he looked down at his lap. "She still hasn't regained any of her memory, except she can remember her training. I feel that my keeping her safe has also impaired her recovery. I want to take you to her, Flint."

Flint stared at Hawk. He was furious, that much was obvious. But there was something in his eyes that they hadn't seen in over a year. There was hope. "I'll be ready in ten minutes." He turned and stormed out the other door. *(What other door? Is it somehow relevant that it's a different door or can you just say the door?)* **WE**

By coding data from the forty fanfiction stories using this system, I have attempted to address the second and third research questions and coupled with personal interviews shown what types of feedback are given and how they are used by both the writers and responders.

### Interviews

In addition to the coding of peer feedback from both online fanfiction groups, I also interviewed six current and former members of the Joe Bootcamp fanfiction community in order to understand what types of feedback they value when revising their stories, as well as the types of comments they typically try to post when they serve as peer reviewers, as required of members of the Bootcamp community. Each of these current and former members has also posted fanfiction on Fanfiction.net, so I also asked questions regarding their perceptions of the differences in the groups, particularly concerning the nature of feedback to fanfiction stories. These interviews are particularly important in determining the members' motivation for writing fanfiction and how membership in the community of practice has helped them grow as writers, as well as how membership has helped shape their view of fanfiction. These interviews helped determine how each fanfiction community functions in terms of Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder's (2002) criteria for a community of practice (Domain, Community, Practice), as well as how successful each group is, in terms of meeting the needs of the group members.

As anonymity is often a desired component of fanfiction websites, I have used only their Bootcamp aliases to protect the identity of respondents and their

online personas. The participants in this study represent a variety of backgrounds and ages, though each respondent is female. Participants were asked questions concerning their experiences writing fanfiction, how long they have written fanfiction, where they have posted stories, their level of experience giving fanfiction, the types of feedback they value, and how they use feedback when revising their stories. A list of interview questions can be found in the appendix of this dissertation.

### Participants

The following six participants are all active writers of fanfiction. Each has posted stories on both Fanfiction.net and Joe Bootcamp. Their comments have been an integral part of this study and have offered tremendous insight in understanding how both fanfiction communities operate. As discussed previously in this dissertation, anonymity is a highly valued feature for many participants in online communities, and the fanfiction groups studied here are no exception. Because of the value placed on online identities instead of actual names, demographic information is difficult to attain, and each of the participants in this study agreed only to be referred to by their Bootcamp identities. However, they all range in age from their late twenties to early forties, and they have all been writing fanfiction for at least ten years.

Participants for this study were chosen primarily because of their willingness to participate. Multiple emails soliciting participants were sent to all email addresses in the Joe Bootcamp database, which contained addresses for over twenty current and former members of the community. After six weeks,

interviews were conducted with the six current and former members who agreed to participate in this study. The participants are listed in alphabetical order according to their Bootcamp alias.

*Allie Faireborn*

Allie Faireborn has been writing fanfiction, including *G.I. Joe* fanfiction, for over thirteen years. She is considered one of the longest tenured Bootcamp members, and she has also served as one of the moderators of the group. Allie Faireborne continues to post stories on Fanfiction.net in the Joe subsection, and she also posts stories and assignments in the Bootcamp community from time to time. Like many members of the Bootcamp community, she has not had formal training in peer review exercises, such as in a composition classroom.

*amykay73*

Like Allie Faireborne, amykay73 has been one of the principle members of Joe Bootcamp throughout its existence, serving as a moderator since 2005. She has written fanfiction for various fandoms for about twelve years, and she started with and continues to write *G.I. Joe* fanfiction. She primarily posts her stories at Fanfiction.net, as she sees Bootcamp as a place to write stories based on specific writing exercises and Fanfiction.net as a place to post a wider variety of stories. She, too, has no formal peer review training.

*DesertFox*

DesertFox has been writing fanfiction for twenty years, since the age of eleven or twelve, and she began posting *Star Trek: The Next Generation* fanfiction on the web at around age sixteen. She is one of the founders and first

moderators of the Bootcamp group, and she has also posted *G.I. Joe* fanfiction at Fanfiction.net. As a founder, she helped create and shape the original vision for Joe Bootcamp, based in large part on what the original members were lacking from their experiences on other fanfiction sites, Fanfiction.net in particular. While she still revisits and reads Joe fanfiction from time to time, her current fanfiction interests reside more in *Nancy Drew/Hardy Boys*, Lois McMaster Bujold's *Vorkosiverse*, and *Star Trek: New Frontier* fandoms. Unlike most of the other participants in this study, DesertFox has a military background, which helps her offer feedback to other Joe fanfiction writers who need help incorporating military regulations, themes, and decorum into their stories, an invaluable resource for fans and authors of what is essentially a military-themed fandom. She has had experiences and training in peer review, but not since her middle school days.

#### *GI Jaye*

GI Jaye has been a reader and responder to fanfiction, primarily Joe fanfiction, for ten to twelve years. She eventually began writing her own stories and posting to small websites and eventually Fanfiction.net and wrote sporadically for a period of four to six years. She was initially hesitant to join the Bootcamp group because of the requirement to write and respond, as she felt she could not fulfill that commitment. Eventually, she joined and was an active member for a few years, but she has rarely posted in the last year or so due to work and family obligations. A college graduate, she cannot think of any peer review training she has had.

*LittleLadyhawke*

LittleLadyHawke posted her first piece of fanfiction in 2000 and her first *G.I. Joe* fanfiction story in 2004. Currently, she exclusively writes Joe fanfiction, and she primarily posts at Fanfiction.net. She remains active in the Bootcamp community, however, and hopes that activity within the community increases. Unlike the other participants, she has had formal peer review training, both in college classes at the University of South Alabama and in her workplace.

*suspreena*

Another former moderator of the Bootcamp community, suspreena has been writing *G.I. Joe* fanfiction for twenty-four years. While she used to write fanfiction for other fandoms, she now exclusively focuses on Joe fanfiction. She primarily posts stories to Fanfiction.net, though she also enjoys the challenges of seeing how other authors respond to writing assignments at Bootcamp, as well as the challenge as a moderator of coming up with creative writing prompts. She has no formal peer review training, but like DesertFox does come from a military background.

## CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

While many writing groups offer some sort of peer feedback for members, this study examined how feedback is used and valued by both authors and responders in fanfiction groups. Textual analysis of the feedback posted at two uniquely different fanfiction groups, the large, public *G.I. Joe* subsite at Fanfiction.net and the small, private Joe Bootcamp, shows that feedback is used quite differently by both groups yet remains an important practice of each community.

At the *G.I. Joe* subsite of Fanfiction.net, where the domain of the group is a desire to share stories about *G.I. Joe* in order to keep the fandom alive, feedback overwhelmingly involves Global Praise (55% of total feedback), general, positive comments along the lines of “I liked it.” While these comments are sometimes marginalized by scholars such as Simmons (2003) as being of little use to authors, at the Fanfiction.net subsite, they are valued as positive reinforcement to continue writing. Other significantly sizeable categories of feedback were Reader’s Needs and Text Playback, comments more specific for revising a text.

At Joe Bootcamp, where the domain of the community is primarily to help one another become better authors, feedback paints a different picture. Here comments concerning grammar (Sentence Edits and Word Edits) represented over one third of total comments. Comments concerning Reader’s Needs and Text Playback also represented significant percentages of overall feedback. Global Praise, meanwhile, accounted for only 10% of total feedback. What is

clear is that both communities use and value feedback, but the types of feedback and how they use them are done for different reasons, which are reflected by the domains and practices of each group.

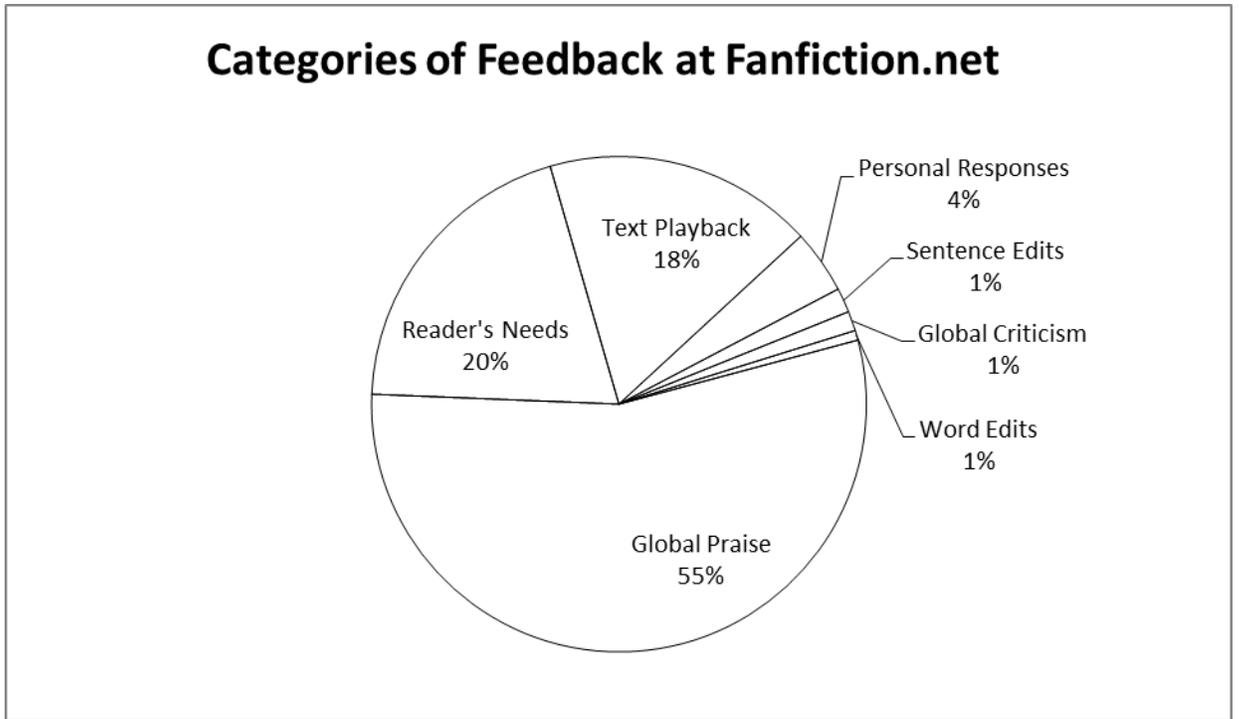
#### Feedback within the Fanfiction.net Subsite

For this study, the feedback given for twenty fanfiction stories at the Joe subsite at Fanfiction.net was analyzed and coded based on the criteria established in chapter three. Feedback at Fanfiction.net is labeled as “reviews” and is posted in a discussion forum attached to each individual story. Responders may leave any number of comments, but feedback is usually left in a short sentence or paragraph offering the responder’s thoughts on the story they read and addressed to the author of the story. Because of the open nature of Fanfiction.net and the limitless amount of possible members of the community, the amount of feedback for any story can vary widely. Sometimes an author might receive as many as twenty-five responders, though other times they might not receive any feedback. Because giving feedback is optional and not a requirement of membership, sometimes it might take weeks, months, or even years before an author receives any feedback. For the twenty stories looked at for this study, the number of unique responders for each story ranged from four to fourteen, with each story receiving an average of 8.95 responses. Feedback tended to be general in nature, focusing on the story as a whole rather than on particular elements of a story. Comments on grammar and mechanics were few, instead focusing primarily on Global Praise, Reader’s Needs, or Text Playback. Comments on Word Edits, Sentence Edits, and Global Criticism represented less

than 1% each of total responses. Table 4 offers an overview of the categories of feedback left at this community of practice, and Figure 1 offers a visual representation of feedback left by percentage.

Table 4: *Feedback within the Joe Subsection of Fanfiction.net*

CATEGORY	TOTAL NUMBER OF FEEDBACK	AVERAGE NUMBER OF FEEDBACK PER STORY
Global Praise (GP)	171	8.55
Reader's Needs (RN)	62	3.10
Text Playback (TP)	55	2.75
Personal Responses (PR)	13	0.65
Sentence Edits (SE)	5	0.25
Global Criticism (GC)	4	0.20
Word Edits (WE)	2	0.10



*Figure 1: Categories of feedback at the Joe Subsite of Fanfiction.net by percentage of overall feedback.*

As evident when looking at Table 4, feedback left at Fanfiction.net overwhelmingly focused on providing Global Praise to the author, with comments such as “Awesome story,” “Great job,” and “I loved it” being typical responses. In fact, 55% of the feedback left fell under this category, averaging 8.55 comments per story. While these comments do not offer constructive criticism for actually improving or revising a particular story, they do offer another positive response for many authors: encouragement to continue writing and posting stories to the site. As DesertFox stated, “At Fanfiction.net, many people only want positive feedback.” The positive feedback an author receives can validate their contributions to the site, reinforcing their membership in the community. For

many authors of fanfiction, particularly at Fanfiction.net, the goal is not necessarily to become a great author, but instead to keep the fandom alive. This feedback reflects the domain of the community of practice, showing that members of Fanfiction.net emphasize a shared interest in *G.I. Joe* fanfiction, and they are quick to praise contributions that build on the fandom.

The other two common categories of feedback at Fanfiction.net were Reader's Needs and Text Playback. Reader's Needs are comments that focus on the reactions or needs of the reader, comments that express the responder's need for information. For example, while these comments can be positive or negative, they serve to tell the author why the story worked for the reader or why the reader felt something was missing. As Simmons (2003) expressed, for many authors, these comments are the most helpful for authors as they offer constructive feedback for revising a text or positive reinforcement beyond Global Praise by offering a rationale for why the responder liked the text. While Reader's Needs were the second most common type of feedback left here, at 20% or 3.10 per story, they still represented less than half the amount of feedback categorized as Global Praise. These comments also reflect the community of practice's identity and domain as they tend to express responder's needs in relation to their own expressions of the *G.I. Joe* characters and settings.

Text Playback feedback represented 18% of the total amount of feedback left, or 2.75 per story. These comments focus on the ideas or the organization of the text, offering feedback as to why the story worked or not. These comments also tended to reinforce the practices of the community of practice, as they could

also offer feedback on how a particular story's ideas or organization fit within the confines of the *G.I. Joe* universe the author was writing in.

Feedback in the *G.I. Joe* subsection of Fanfiction.net was overwhelmingly positive, as shown not only by the large amount of feedback categorized as Global Praise, but also by the significantly few comments that could be labeled as Global Criticism. Representing less than one percent of total feedback, general, negative comments were few and far between. This could be a product of the focus by both authors and responders on their shared interest in the fandom, rather than on improving as writers. This is further supported by the significantly small amount of feedback labeled as Sentence Edits and Word Edits, both also representing far less than one percent each of the overall feedback. As the participants in this study said, Fanfiction.net is a great place to share stories with readers who are interested in and understand the source material. The focus is usually on the characters and plots and continuing the stories beyond their original medium. It also offers a place to be creative and offer unique or alternative takes on characters they love. While grammar and mechanics can be important, the overall focus of this community of practice is on keeping the fandom alive, not on producing well-written, error-free stories.

#### Feedback within the Joe Bootcamp Community

Because the domain is different at Joe Bootcamp, with a focus on becoming better writers instead of just sharing fiction to keep the fandom alive, the types of feedback responders post are also remarkably different than at Fanfiction.net. Like the domain, the practices of this fanfiction community of

practice are also different. Whereas feedback at Fanfiction.net is posted in a discussion forum, feedback at Bootcamp is posted on a draft of the story itself, usually through the comment function on MSWord or compatible word-processing software. Some responders choose to insert colored comments into the document through the word-processor program in lieu of the comment function. Most responders offer general statements in paragraph form before and/or after the story with briefer statements also posted throughout the story as well.

In addition to the differences in how feedback is posted, the number of comments and responders at Joe Bootcamp also are quite different from Fanfiction.net. To begin with, an author posting a story at Joe Bootcamp can be confident she will receive feedback, as members are required to do so, and the feedback is usually posted within a couple of weeks. At Bootcamp, almost every story is reviewed by two responders, though on a few occasions stories will have only one or as many as three responders. Though there are fewer individual responders at Bootcamp than at Fanfiction.net, the number of comments is actually higher, at an average of 18.25 comments per story. This signifies that while there are fewer responders at Bootcamp, the responders give much more thorough feedback than responders at Fanfiction.net, probably because they are focused more on helping fellow community members improve their writing ability rather than just focusing on whether they liked the fanfiction piece. The ability to comment directly on the draft of the story, instead of in a discussion box at the

end of it, also allows for the responder to interact with the story more comprehensively.

These differences in how feedback is posted help shape the practices of the communities, but they also reflect the different domains of the two communities. Because feedback is left at the end of each story at Fanfiction.net, comments consisting of Global Praise are easier to leave than comments focused on Sentence or Word Edits. This reflects the domain, as Fanfiction.net is, as stated previously, primarily focused on keeping the fandom alive.

At Joe Bootcamp, the ability to comment on the draft itself offers responders the ability to comment on grammar directly on the sentence, making it easier to post these types of comments. This helps shape the practices of this community, but it also reflects the domain of Joe Bootcamp, which is, of course, to help one another become better writers. Feedback at Joe Bootcamp, therefore, is strikingly different than that posted at Fanfiction.net

For the twenty stories at Joe Bootcamp looked at in this study, the types of feedback tend to focus less on Global Praise, which dominated the feedback in the Fanfiction.net community, and more on Reader's Needs, Text Playback, and the editing categories. Table 5 shows the number of feedback posted for each category, and Figure 2 shows the same data represented by percentage of overall feedback.

Table 5: *Feedback within the Joe Bootcamp Community*

CATEGORY	TOTAL NUMBER OF FEEDBACK	AVERAGE NUMBER OF FEEDBACK PER STORY
Reader's Needs (RN)	112	5.60
Sentence Edits (SE)	83	4.15
Text Playback (TP)	66	3.30
Word Edits (WE)	44	2.20
Global Praise (GP)	37	1.85
Personal Responses (PR)	20	1.00
Global Criticism (GC)	3	0.15

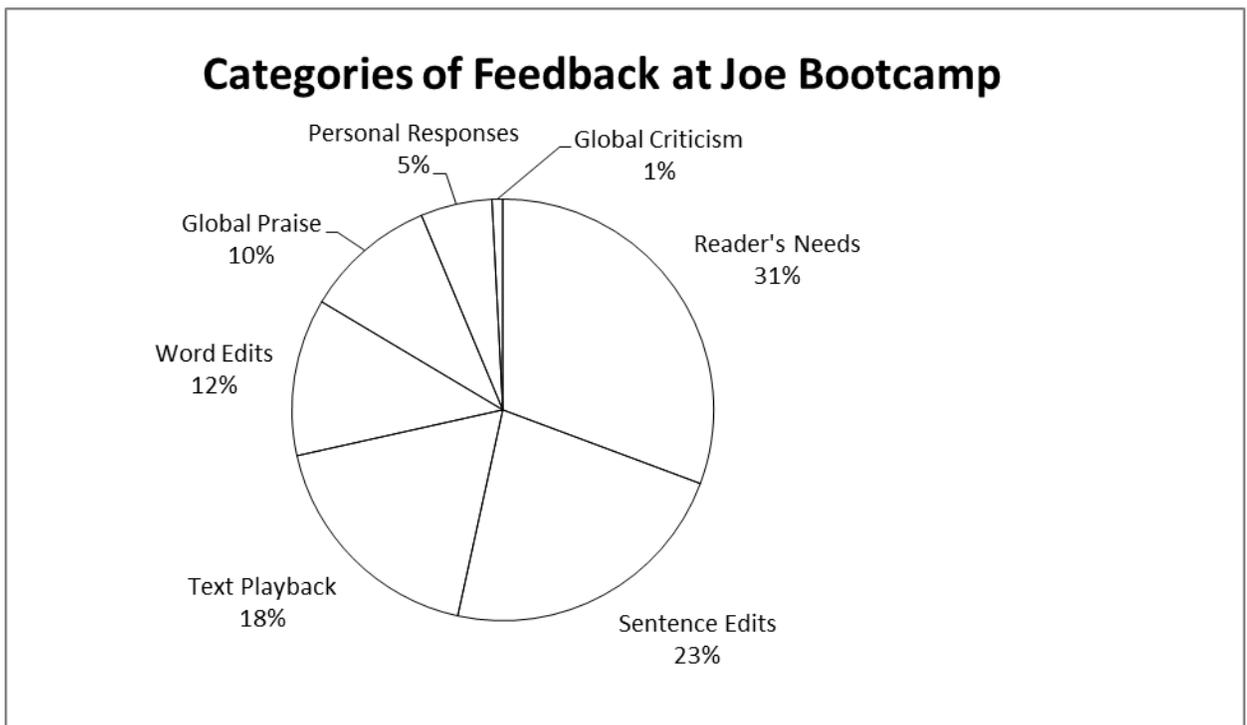


Figure 2: Categories of feedback at Joe Bootcamp by percentage of overall feedback.

As noted previously, the largest category of feedback at Joe Bootcamp were comments focusing on Reader's Needs, which represented 31% of total feedback, averaging 5.60 comments per story. Simmons (2003) pointed out that these comments, focusing on the reactions and needs of the reader, are often the most desired comments for authors, as they help the authors connect with their audience, as well as know what is working for the audience and what they need to change to help create a better experience for the reader. The participants in this study echoed Simmons' claim in their interviews, stressing that feedback that helps the author know what the reader needs is best. LittleLadyhawke refers to this type of feedback as "constructive criticism" and says this type of feedback helps "the writer improve their work" by "being supportive, and giving true and honest constructive criticism without being mean about it." Because the domain of this community of practice is to help each other become better writers, it is no surprise that comments reflecting on the needs of the reader are the most common type of feedback posted here.

The second largest category of feedback consisted of Sentence Edits, representing 23% of all comments and an average of 4.15 per story. Similarly, Word Edits was the fourth largest category, averaging 2.20 comments per story, or 12% of all feedback. Taken together, comments focusing on editing for grammar and mechanics represented 35% of all feedback at Joe Bootcamp.

While many composition scholars such as Elbow (1973), Murray (2004), and Simmons (2003) caution against feedback that focuses primarily on editing, particularly early in the writing process, members of the Joe Bootcamp place a

high value on comments addressing grammar and mechanics. For members of this community of practice, improving their writing means not only producing better, more interesting stories, but also grammatically correct, clear writing that is easy to follow and understand. As amykay73 states, “I’m terrible at grammar, so I like to have someone point out those mistakes.” Suspreena echoes this, desiring “honest feedback on style, grammar...If it will help me be a better writer, I want to hear it.” It is important to remember that many Bootcamp members have had little to no formal, classroom-based training in peer review, and many also have had little training in grammar and mechanics. The desire to have responders give feedback on grammar was cited by many participants as a prime attraction of the Joe Bootcamp community. In addition, a pet peeve concerning other fanfiction sites that many of the participants shared is fanfiction authors who don’t make any effort to use “readable grammar,” a common occurrence of Fanfiction.net in particular. Again, this reflects the domain of the community of practice, as members see grammar as essential to their development as authors.

Text Playback represented another significant category of feedback, consisting of an average of 3.30 comments per story, or 18% of total feedback, the same percentage for the Fanfiction.net community. These comments were valued in the Bootcamp community because they helped authors focus on the main ideas or organization of the stories, which tend to be helpful in the revision process. GI Jaye elaborates, desiring feedback that:

tells me ways I can improve that deal with overall plot, not just mechanics. When I have tried to research and work in an area I

know nothing about—like military etiquette—and someone is able to say “Hey, you are really supposed to address that person this way or this person would never call them that, they would say\_\_\_\_\_”

Because members of this community come from diverse backgrounds, they can often help one another with major plot points or characterizations to improve their stories. Text Playback comments can also help improve the organization of a story, helping the story flow better, which is often a concern of the authors.

Global Praise averaged 1.85 comments per story, or 10% of total feedback, far less than the 55% of total comments at Fanfiction.net. These comments, consisting of feedback such as “I liked it” or “This is good,” were also used differently in the two groups. At Fanfiction.net, these types of comments were often isolated, being the only comment a responder would post for the author. At Joe Bootcamp, these comments were never the sole comment posted, and they were usually used either as an introductory or concluding comment to the story. For example, a typical responder’s comments to a story at Bootcamp began with “Really, really nice.” While this statement offers encouragement to the author, it does not really provide constructive criticism on how to improve the draft or why it is nice. At Fanfiction.net, comments in this vein often go no further; at Bootcamp, however, the responder continued:

I honestly love the voice of F and LJ in your work. You make them seem so real and more than cartoon characters. I actually find your Flint quite attractive, which is saying something, trust me...You

have a real talent for showing characters and action and conveying feeling in a scene.

The responder does not just tell the author that it is good (Global Praise); instead, she tells her *why* it is good, because of how it appealed to the responder (Reader's Needs). Therefore, while Global Praise made up 10% of overall comments at Bootcamp, it is used and accepted at Bootcamp only when used in conjunction with other, more constructive types of feedback. As GI Jaye points out:

Cheerleading where it's "OMG it's so good write more now, I can't wait to see what's next, you HAVE to post soon, OMG pleeze!" is completely worthless and useless. I like that you get much less if any of this in Bootcamp as opposed to other places...If the goal is to better yourself as a writer and in turn help better others, then you need to dig down to a deeper level and really get into the "meat" of the story and the overarching work.

This is not to say that GI Jaye thinks that the practices of Joe Bootcamp are necessarily superior to those of other groups, but rather that the domain of Joe Bootcamp is different than other sites like Fanfiction.net. Because the emphasis at Joe Bootcamp is to help each other become better writers, comments that focus solely on encouragement and not on helping authors revise and edit their stories are not valued by this community of practice. Similarly, isolated, unspecific negative comments, or Global Criticism, are also not valued at Bootcamp, though they only represented less than 1% of the feedback.

Personal responses, or comments that focus primarily on the author's mindset, averaged 1.00 comments per story, or 5% of the total feedback, similar to the 4% of comments at Fanfiction.net. These comments do not seem to influence revision at either community. This could be due to the emphasis on the stories as part of the *G.I. Joe* universe at Fanfiction.net being more important than the author's intentions. Because the domain of this community chiefly concerns the characters and settings as continuations of a greater fandom, respondents might be less concerned about the authors of the text. In turn, at Joe Bootcamp, the focus tended to be on how the stories were written instead of why the author wrote them that way.

While feedback is an important practice of both the Fanfiction.net and Joe Bootcamp communities, the nature of the feedback left and how it is valued and used is quite different between the two communities of practice. As discussed in the following chapter, the differences between the two communities' domains influences not only the members of the community, but perhaps more importantly, the practices of each community, showing that even though both groups are centered on the desire to produce *G. I. Joe* fanfiction, they are distinctly different communities of practice, particularly when it comes to the role of feedback in each group.

Overall, it is clear that the domain of the community influences both the amount and the type of feedback posted by responders. Authors at the *G.I. Joe* subsite of Fanfiction.net generally post to share stories with other fans of *G.I. Joe*, and the types of feedback they receive and desire reflect that. Likewise,

members of Joe Bootcamp are focused on helping each other improve their writing skills, and the feedback posted at Joe Bootcamp reflects that desire. Feedback within each group reflects the overall desires and domain of the members of the community, but it serves an important role in the practices of the communities, as well.

## CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION AND LIMITATIONS

As a composition teacher and scholar, I have often found myself frustrated with peer review sessions in my composition classes, a frustration scholars such as Harris (1992), VanDeWeghe (2004), and Miller (2005) have noted is common for writing teachers. Meanwhile, I was introduced to the phenomenon of fanfiction groups, groups devoted to writing and sharing stories based on established characters and settings from literature, television, movies, and other forms of media. As I became more familiar with these groups, I found myself fascinated that fanfiction authors were sharing stories and others were responding with comments about the stories for the author. I was even more fascinated with groups such as Joe Bootcamp, a fanfiction group formed with the goal of helping fanfiction authors improve their writing skills.

Interestingly, while I had struggled with helping my students respond to each other's drafts, fanfiction authors, working online and sharing stories with virtual strangers, seemed to value peer feedback as an important component of writing. Feedback, it seemed, plays an integral role in the vitality of fanfiction groups.

I chose to study fanfiction groups in order to see how feedback is used within these groups and how that feedback shapes the practices of the communities, as well as how different types of fanfiction groups might use feedback differently. Using Wenger's (2004) concept of communities of practice, I studied fanfiction at two diverse fanfiction online groups, the *G.I. Joe* subsite of Fanfiction.net, a large, public group devoted to sharing *G.I. Joe* fanfiction for the

enjoyment of the members, and Joe Bootcamp, a small, private group dedicated to helping *G.I. Joe* fanfiction authors become better writers. As textual analysis of feedback posted for multiple stories at each group showed, feedback was highly valued by both groups, but the types of feedback and how it is used were significantly dependent on the domain, or common purpose, of each community. Ultimately, I determined that the domain of each fanfiction group determines the types of feedback used and valued in each group, the domain and practices of each group shape how members experience fanfiction groups, and members perceive feedback differently in each group, based on their roles as authors and responders.

#### Domain Determines Types of Feedback

In any community of practice, the domain influences the practices of the community. As Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002) wrote, “A well-developed domain becomes a statement of what knowledge the community will steward” (p. 32). Though the *G.I. Joe* subsection of Fanfiction.net and Joe Bootcamp are both on the surface fanfiction groups dedicated to writing and sharing fanfiction on a common subject, the cartoons, toys, and comic books of *G.I. Joe: A Real American Hero*, the focus of the group, or the domain, differs between the groups. The primary domain of the subsection of Fanfiction.net is the desire to produce and share new stories based on the Joe mythos, and members are united by their love of the source material and the desire to read and produce new stories for their beloved characters. The feedback, then, is focused on whether or not the responders found the authors’ stories worthy of the Joe

universe, resulting in an abundance of Global Praise, but also significant feedback concerning the Reader's needs and Text Playback, yet very little writing and editing instruction. After all, most members of Fanfiction.net are not necessarily concerned with developing their individual writing skills, but rather entertaining themselves and their readers. LittleLadyhawke wrote that "it's a good creative outlet, and I like the characters that were created. I just write them the way I see them."

Feedback left by responders at Fanfiction.net focuses primarily on offering encouragement and praise or addressing why the stories worked or did not work for the responder. When comments are critical, they often focus on characterizations or plot elements that conflict with the responders' perceptions of what they should be, based either on official *G.I. Joe* canon or, sometimes, the responders' own fanfiction stories. As GI Jaye related:

Once on Fanfiction.net, I was told something along the lines of "this is great but you're forgetting that this person is from here and they grew up in this way and did this, etc." The problem was the only part of that statement that was actually *true* was the character's birthplace. I had that correct, but nothing in *official* canon said anything else about them until their adult life. So I didn't change that because 1. I would have destroyed the foundation of the story and 2. This person was so caught up in a secondary sort of unofficial fanfic canon that they couldn't accept that there might be other ways/possibilities out there.

As shown in this example, the feedback at the *G.I. Joe* subsection of Fanfiction.net primarily focuses on how stories fit into the broader scope of *G.I. Joe*, which is the domain of this community of practice, rather than on the development of the author.

At Joe Bootcamp, the primary focus is to help one another become better, more confident writers, so the focus is less on the desire to keep the fandom alive, resulting in significantly less feedback designed to provide praise and significantly more comments designed to help authors revise and edit their stories, as evident by the much higher focus on Sentence Edits and Word Edits. While in many composition classes the tendency is often to encourage peer reviewers to focus more on revision and less on editing until late in the writing process (VanDeWeghe, 2004; Murray, 2004), at Joe Bootcamp feedback focusing on editing is highly valued, as discussed in the next section. Comments focusing on Reader's Needs, feedback that addresses the needs or reactions of the reader, are also abundant at Joe Bootcamp, though here these comments are more likely to focus on how specific elements of the story connected to the responder's understanding, rather than how well they fit into the *G.I. Joe* canon.

Though both communities differ in focus and types of feedback, both communities serve a purpose for their members, and the type of feedback valued in each community of practice is determined through the needs and desires of each respective community.

## Domain and Practices Shape Members' Experiences

Members of fanfiction communities are drawn to fanfiction groups by an interest in the fandom associated with that particular group. If someone is not interested in *G.I. Joe*, then chances are poor that they will be interested in reading and writing *G.I. Joe* fanfiction. However, the choice of where to post and interact with other fans of fanfiction is more complex than simply a shared interest in the fandom; different fanfiction groups offer their own various identities, and each group can serve a different purpose and membership, even within the realm of the same community of interest.

As previously stated, while both Fanfiction.net and Joe Bootcamp serve members interested in *G.I. Joe* fanfiction, the domain and practices of the two groups are rather different. At Fanfiction.net, there is no required membership process beyond a simple, free registration; anyone can read, post, or respond to fanfiction on the site, as much or as little as she might desire. At Joe Bootcamp, one must apply for membership, be accepted into the group by a moderator, and pledge to post her own stories and respond to other authors' drafts. At Fanfiction.net, authors are pretty much free to post any story they want, so long as they don't violate the terms of usage of the website, which focuses primarily on making sure nothing obscene or illegal is shared. At Bootcamp, most stories are written in response to assignments posted by a moderator or other member of the group, and submissions are required to follow the parameters of the writing assignment. These assignments usually focus on using certain characters,

settings, or themes, and they are primarily designed to challenge the members of the group. Therefore, members experience the two groups in different ways.

As stated earlier in this dissertation, all of the participants in this study were drawn to Fanfiction.net before they ever joined Joe Bootcamp. When one types “fanfiction” into a search engine, Fanfiction.net, due to its large size and inclusivity of many different fandoms, is usually one of the first websites to appear. Since *G.I. Joe* is well-represented at Fanfiction.net, people interested in the fandom often stumble upon the site. For most of the participants in this study, Fanfiction.net was their first major experience reading fanfiction, as well as the first place they posted their stories. Interestingly, each of the participants also continued to post at Fanfiction.net during and/or after their time as active members of Joe Bootcamp, and most also post stories in subsections of Fanfiction.net besides *G.I. Joe*, though those outside interests vary widely among participants. Bootcamp, while a distinctly different community of practice, did not replace Fanfiction.net for the participants, but rather served as an alternative to the community at Fanfiction.net.

Participants experience the Joe subsection of Fanfiction.net as a place to read and post stories about the characters and settings they love, beyond the stories and cartoons from their pasts, as well as alternatives to the more recent iterations (movie, new comics and cartoons, etc.) that many of the participants are not as fond of. It is also a place that offers freedom to experience the Joe universe however they would like, through the ability to write completely new adventures or new takes on classic stories. They are also free to introduce new

characters or flesh out seldom used characters that only made brief appearances in the toy line, cartoon, or comic books. As suspreena stated, “between the comic book and the cartoon versions, there is a lot of interesting material to work with.”

Members of this community of practice are also not limited by restrictions such as page lengths or deadlines, allowing the authors to write their stories how they want to. As long as illegal or illicit material is avoided, members are able to write without further limitations. This freedom allows members to have fun while contributing to a community that shares an interest in the fandom without having to worry about their everyday lives. Allie Faireborne stated that posting fanfiction is a “great stress relief and lets you forget about the real world for a bit.” The anonymous nature of the community and the ever-changing membership allow members to share as little about their real lives as they want, and members can also easily change their online aliases if they so choose.

Because Fanfiction.net is free to join and members are able to post and respond as frequently or infrequently as they like without commitments, participants are also able to come and go as they please, posting when they want to and responding only to those they want. If a participant wants to post part of a story and more later, they are free to do so. This can, however, lead to problems for some participants, as DesertFox shared, “At Fanfiction.net, many people only want positive feedback, and also withhold chapters based on lack of feedback.” GI Jaye concurred, pointing out that many posters will only post subsequent chapters to their fanfiction stories when a suitable number of positive comments have been posted, resulting in a push for the types of comments this

study labels as Global Praise and that GI Jaye called “cheerleading.” This could possibly help explain the number of unfinished, or works in progress, stories that are posted on Fanfiction.net. An additional negative aspect of Fanfiction.net, according to suspreena, is that the amount of feedback for a particular story can vary considerably, and sometimes “you might not get any.”

Overall, though, participants praise Fanfiction.net, the *G.I. Joe* subsite in particular, for being a positive community for aspiring fanfiction authors and those just interested in reading more stories in the *G.I. Joe* universe. Fanfiction.net, while limiting in helping produce better stories through constructive feedback, offers tremendous encouragement, particularly for inexperienced fanfiction authors. Not having to post, as well as having little restrictions on what they can post, allows more creative freedom and permits the members of this community of practice, authors, responders, and observers alike, to share the love of the domain.

While Fanfiction.net allows members to read and post with few limitations, Joe Bootcamp offers a much more structured experience, resulting in members experiencing the community in vastly different ways than Fanfiction.net. To begin with, the domain of Joe Bootcamp is not just a desire by members to share in the fandom, but primarily to become better writers. Because of this significant difference in domain, as well as the differences in the practices of giving feedback, members experience Joe Bootcamp as a community of practice that challenges them through writing assignments and critical feedback to improve their writing ability.

At Joe Bootcamp, members were drawn in by the required commitment of participating regularly and pledging to both complete the fanfiction assignments, as well as their assigned reviews. For most assignments, members have to write at least two reviews of other members' stories, which consist of in-depth feedback on the stories that address their opinions of the stories, as well as how to make the stories better. Initially members were able to choose whose stories they reviewed, but this was changed over time so all authors could be guaranteed their stories would get feedback. Writing reviews can be a considerable time commitment for members, and participants in this study cite this requirement as both a reason they were reluctant to initially join the group and a reason many members have left the group. Others see Joe Bootcamp as a temporary part of their development as writers, a place where they could hone their skills before posting their stories to other sites, such as Fanfiction.net. While Fanfiction.net now offers a section for beta-readers to give feedback on stories before authors post them to the main site, for many years this was not the case. Therefore, many writers of *G.I. Joe* fanfiction saw Joe Bootcamp as a place to develop stories with the opportunity to have guaranteed feedback.

Besides being guaranteed to receive feedback on their stories, members also like that the feedback they receive tends to be constructive and critical, as opposed to feedback that only offers Global Praise or Global Criticism. As amykay73 points out, "Bootcamp was meant to be more of a writing critique community to help others out. So the feedback there should be more critical and verbose." GI Jaye elaborates on this point:

In theory, [Bootcamp] should be much more honest and straightforward. No “cheerleading,” but honest, thorough—brutal if needed—criticism and critique. If the goal is to better yourself as a writer and in turn help better others, then you need to dig down to a deeper level and really get into the “meat” of the story and the overarching work.

Of course, theory and practice don’t always mean the same thing, and Bootcamp members also have occasionally differed in their definitions of criticism. As DesertFox explained:

People in Bootcamp are supposed to be open to feedback, both giving and receiving. Some people had different descriptions of constructive criticism than others—for instance, one member of the group would almost rewrite a person’s paragraphs to make them fit.

These conflicts sometimes, unfortunately, could cause friction within the group, and occasionally resulted in members feeling discouraged about their writing ability and less inclined to participate in the community or even write fanfiction at all. As GI Jaye shared:

I once had a critique that was viewed by a lot of folks as very harsh. So much that one of the moderators emailed me off the list to make sure I was “ok with everything.” She was genuinely concerned that it was harsh/upsetting enough that I might quit. The critique heavily focused on what to fix/what went wrong, especially with military

protocol...I can certainly see why the moderator was concerned—it was a difficult critique for me to read in a lot of ways.

Sometimes, though, members have found beneficial aspects from even the harshest reviews. Amykay73 offered her experience:

I'm not looking for professional editors. To get a review back that's covered in red ink, and to have several paragraphs rewritten is very discouraging...I had one reviewer that was so critical of my work, that it made writing less enjoyable for me for a time. But in the long run, I did learn a lot from their critiques, and the lessons are still with me today.

As the participants in this study attest, Bootcamp members should know going in that the group will be critical of each other's work; however, they also emphasized that feedback is usually constructive and encouraging, and overly negative comments are the exception and not the rule.

Participants cite Bootcamp as an important influence on their development as fanfiction authors, and in some cases, as writers in general. One aspect of Bootcamp that the participants enjoy in particular are the challenges posted by the moderators. While sometimes members can post any story they want, often the writing assignment would be a challenge that all members would write a story in response to. These challenges could consist of members being randomly assigned certain characters to write about, certain phrases they must incorporate into their story, or a certain type of story such as romance, comedy, thriller, etc. Challenges encourage members to think outside their usual comfort zones, as

well as give members a chance to see how other authors approach the same assignment. DesertFox, in particular, benefited from these challenges: “I liked getting the different perspectives, getting to read other people’s work in progress, and the set goals—[they] forced me to challenge myself.”

Though Joe Bootcamp requires a significant time commitment and could sometimes be a demanding experience, each of the participants in this study found it to be a rewarding experience. Most of the participants feel that it helped them become better writers, and many have posted stories born in the Bootcamp group to other sites, particularly Fanfiction.net. By being a part of a community of authors interested in offering constructive feedback beyond Global Praise, participants felt their stories were appreciated and improved.

Unfortunately, due in large part to the time commitments and outside interests of the core membership, as well as the recent introduction of a subsite on Fanfiction.net for beta readers to review and offer feedback on stories for those interested before posting to the larger site, Joe Bootcamp has fallen on hard times. After experiencing a hiatus in 2008 and relaunching in 2009, the group went on another hiatus in late 2010 which it has not returned from. Four of the six participants interviewed for this study, however, expressed hope that the group will attempt another revival in the near future.

Of course, the demise of Joe Bootcamp spawns an important question: Why did it fail? The answer, I believe, is a complicated one. Certainly, the time requirements, as cited by GI Jaye, played a significant role in its closure. Interests in other fandoms undoubtedly contributed as well. But for many

members, I'm not sure it did "fail." Instead, it seems more likely that members simply outgrew their need for the group. Unlike Fanfiction.net, which served as a place to share fanfiction with other fans with no strict membership requirements, Joe Bootcamp was established to help writers become better writers. As members developed and refined their writing skills, their need for the group became less apparent. After all, it is not as if most of the members quit writing fanfiction; all but one participant still actively write fanfiction. Instead, it is more likely that for the most active members, Joe Bootcamp had simply run its course. Composition courses, which are also designed to help writers develop and refine their writing skills, are not intended to last forever; most last approximately fifteen weeks. Joe Bootcamp, then, seems to have served a short-term need for its members, and without a constant influx of new members was, therefore, no longer needed. While it was needed, however, it certainly played a significant role in members' development as fanfiction writers.

#### Perceptions of Feedback within the Communities

While this study has already addressed the types of feedback found in Joe Bootcamp and the *G.I. Joe* subsection of Fanfiction.net and argued that the types of feedback are influenced by each respective community of practice's domain, it is also important to understand how members of the communities of practice perceive the feedback, and perhaps more importantly, how they use feedback when revising their fanfiction. After all, if the authors of a story do not use the feedback left for them, then the feedback serves little to no purpose within the fanfiction writer's writing process. Participants in this study, as

members of both communities of practice, take on multiple roles in both fanfiction groups, none more important than their roles as authors and responders. It is, therefore, important to understand how participants perceive feedback in both roles. This section of the study attempts to show which types of feedback the participants find most useful in revision, which types they tend to give as responders, and their overall impressions of giving and receiving feedback as both authors and responders.

### *As Authors*

While participants received feedback as authors of fanfiction at both fanfiction communities, the types of feedback received varied greatly, as discussed in chapter four. While the types of feedback preferred may also contribute to where an author chooses to post her fanfiction, participants in this study found that certain types of feedback were more useful in actually revising their stories, as opposed to simply offering affirmation of their work. Constructive feedback that addressed why a particular piece needed improvement (Reader's Needs) or offered grammatical instruction (Sentence Edits, Word Edits) tended to be preferred by participants receiving feedback as authors.

Comments concerning plot elements, characters, and even military etiquette were highly valued by participants, as they help the authors adjust their stories to meet the needs of the audience, and let the author know, as amykay73 stated, "what works and doesn't work" in the story. These types of comments, which this study labeled as Reader's Needs, were cited by all but one participant.

These comments, as stated by suspreena, are paramount to helping the author “keep the flavor of the characters and the universe.”

Authors also found comments concerning grammar helpful, particularly when responders gave examples, which, as could be expected, was more common at Bootcamp than at the subsection of Fanfiction.net. Grammar comments were desired by two thirds of authors interviewed, and there was a strong correlation to the authors’ own comfort level with their own grammar ability. Authors that felt they were pretty strong at grammar and mechanics did not seek comments concerning grammar, while those who were less comfortable placed a high value on them.

While participants did not find comments offering Global Praise helpful for revision, they did find other benefits for these comments. These comments let authors know their stories are appreciated, and they are cited as helpful in encouraging authors to continue writing and sharing fanfiction. As LittleLadyhawke states, “It is always nice to know that not only has someone read what I’ve written, but they took the time to let me know if they liked it or not.”

Comments that can be labeled as Global Criticism, while found to be rare by this study in both fanfiction communities, were strongly discouraged by many participants. These types of comments, which LittleLadyhawke labels “flames,” offer little, if any, insight into how to make the story better, and often they serve only to cause friction between the author and the responder.

### *As Responders*

While all the participants in this study enjoy receiving constructive feedback as authors, they have varying comfort levels giving feedback as responders. LittleLadyhawke and suspreeena, for example both expressed high enjoyment of and comfort level with giving feedback. Amykay73, while also a fan of giving feedback, has found herself becoming more comfortable giving feedback the more she does it, a trend common for many writing students, as noted by Murray (2004). DesertFox also enjoys giving feedback, but she also expressed a tendency to avoid giving feedback to authors she has found are not receptive to receiving feedback, which while more common at Fanfiction.net, has also happened at Joe Bootcamp. GI Jaye usually likes giving feedback, and she is fairly comfortable doing so, but she is less comfortable when tasked with reviewing a story that is excessively poor. Allie Faireborne, on the other hand, has a hard time giving feedback because she “doesn’t want to discourage anyone or be mean.”

Like Allie Faireborne, each of the participants was mindful of hurting the feelings of authors or discouraging them from writing, particularly when addressing how honest they are with the feedback they give. While all the participants consider themselves honest, they find themselves struggling to be completely honest when faced with what they consider a really bad story. Many find themselves sugarcoating their criticism, and amykay73 even admits occasionally telling the author the story was good even when she did not think it was. GI Jaye feels that she is sometimes too nice, which can hurt the overall

feedback process for everyone: “I wish people were tougher and more constructive with me, but I struggle to do that for others.” Suspreena echoes GI Jaye, pointing out that “if I am not [honest], then I cheat not only myself but the other writers.”

The types of feedback participants give as responders vary, as one might expect, by the community the feedback is left at. As LittleLadyhawke pointed out, feedback is more complimentary (Global Praise) at Fanfiction.net and more constructive at Joe Bootcamp. Global Praise is found at Joe Bootcamp, but participants perceive that these comments are secondary to more constructive feedback.

The types of feedback participants feel they give are consistent, for the most part, with the types of feedback they desire as authors. Responders give feedback directed towards plot, mechanics, structure, and characterization, and participants claim that they try to give feedback that they would like to receive on their own stories. GI Jaye, however, finds herself sometimes focusing too much on grammar, even though she does not generally seek grammatical feedback on her own work. She feels this tendency is possibly because of her own comfort level with grammar, so therefore it makes grammar easier to comment on. She has made an effort to focus more on responding to problems with plot and storyline and focusing less on grammar and mechanics.

The participants, for the most part, believe that the comments they give their fellow authors are used positively in the revision process. Though they can't always know that is the case, most have seen evidence of other members using

their comments to improve their stories. Whether the authors use their comments, however, is not up to them, but they try to offer the best feedback they can in hopes that the authors will at least consider their suggestions. As LittleLadyhawke said, "I hope my feedback is helpful. I hope they use it for anything from making them feel better to helping them make their story better."

What participants can be sure of, however, is that giving feedback as responders has made them better authors of fanfiction. Each participant has cited serving as a responder for other authors as critical to their own development as fanfiction authors. From seeing what others do and incorporating that into their own writing to viewing their own texts through more objective eyes, it is apparent that serving as responders has made each participant more critical of their own writing process. Amykay73 perhaps put it best when stating, "I think I've gotten better because I have more of an editor built in than when I started. But it's also making writing more difficult because I do want to edit things as I write it." While writing might be more difficult when the authors produce their own works, the ability to be more critical of their own drafts has helped them become better fanfiction authors and responders, which also makes them integral members of fanfiction communities of practice.

#### Limitations and Opportunities for Further Study

As with almost any study there are limitations to this study, but limitations can also bring about opportunities for further study. To begin with, any studies of communities of practice are by their very essence limited, because as Wenger (1998) has shown, every community of practice is unique, and therefore the

practices of the community are also unique. While much can be learned about the role of feedback in the fanfiction groups studied within, one must be careful to avoid over generalizing how feedback can and should be used in other situations, particularly classroom settings. Though I admit this research was sparked in no small part by my own frustrations with classroom peer review, particularly in freshman composition classes, I have also come to recognize that there are significant inherent differences in the domain of an academic classroom and the domain of a fanfiction group, even a small, intimate community such as Joe Bootcamp, thus limiting the usefulness of trying to force certain types of feedback on my unsuspecting students. However, recognizing that authors do seek feedback and that certain types of feedback seem to be more helpful in allowing authors to revise their work can influence the training of peer reviewers in the classroom. Viewing each class as its own community of practice could be useful in determining what types of feedback each unique class seeks for their own drafts. Composition instructors should be careful not to discount certain types of feedback, such as Global Praise or editing comments, as some students, like fanfiction writers, might use these comments as motivation to continue writing and revising their work.

An important limitation of this study that must be noted concerns the anonymous nature of fanfiction groups. Because fanfiction groups have an inherent degree of anonymity, data on demographics such as age, gender, nationality, and social and educational background is highly difficult to determine. The researcher, as well as the members themselves for that matter, must rely on

an element of trust, and one can never be too certain of the participants' true identities. In online environments and virtual worlds, real identities can be secondary, and in some cases the online identity might be very different from the actual person. Members of the two fanfiction groups studied often know very little about each other, so a large part of their identity is shaped through the fanfiction they create, as well as through the feedback they offer each other.

This study is also, unfortunately, limited by the number of participants interviewed within. Though multiple efforts were made to interview a larger number of participants, I was unable to do so, in part because of the anonymous nature of the groups and the currently inactive status of Joe Bootcamp.

Therefore, while the interviews provided many insights into how members perceive and use feedback within the communities, more interviews could have increased these insights. It would have been nice to get the perspective of male members, for instance, particularly because they represent a significant minority in most fanfiction communities, both in and out of the *G.I. Joe* fandom.

The interviews also reflect a particular chronological viewpoint, particularly in the case of Joe Bootcamp, as participants were by circumstances looking back on their experiences, limiting their validity. A longitudinal study of feedback in a fanfiction group over many years could offer insight into how the practices of the community shift over time, including how members both use and view feedback within the community.

Another opportunity for further study would be a study comparing how feedback is used on fanfiction.net within different genres. For instance, does the

fandom affect the type of feedback given and desired within the group? This study is concerned with writers of *G.I. Joe* fanfiction, but might the results have been different concerning *Harry Potter*, *Twilight*, or *Gossip Girl* fanfiction? Comparing how feedback is used across fandoms might offer additional insights into the nature of feedback in fanfiction communities.

### Final Thoughts

While I have always been a firm believer in the importance of feedback to the writing process, this study has confirmed to me that feedback is essential to revision, but it has also shown me that feedback can also serve other meaningful purposes. Like Simmons (2003), whose coding system was adapted for this study, I had little use for Global Praise, though I have found that these comments can serve an important role for many authors. For many writers, these comments can offer validity and encouragement; this is particularly true for inexperienced or self-conscious writers. At Fanfiction.net, many authors actually seek these comments, in lieu of constructive criticism, and the praise seems to serve as a catalyst for their continued productivity as fanfiction writers.

I have also discounted the importance of feedback focusing on grammar, particularly early in the writing process, inspired by composition scholars such as Murray (2004). However, for many writers of fanfiction, particularly at Joe Bootcamp, feedback on grammar is desired and oftentimes seen as essential to revising other elements of the story as well. Fanfiction writers tend to view revision and editing as overlapping concepts, and many authors seek comments on both at the same time.

Of course, the preference of Global Praise at Fanfiction.net and the focus on comments concerning grammar and mechanics at Joe Bootcamp represent a shift from the types of feedback often valued by composition teachers in the classroom. Why, then, do fanfiction authors seek different types of feedback than students in composition classes? Why do the communities of writers at Fanfiction.net and Joe Bootcamp look so different from communities of writers in the classroom?

Perhaps it is because fanfiction authors, as members of communities of practice, determine what types of feedback are desired themselves, rather than through mandates given by an instructor who ultimately determines a grade for the course. Because the members of the fanfiction groups are free to leave at any time without penalty, unlike students in classrooms, they share responsibility for the group's success or failure. The practices of the community are determined by the domain of the group, so the types of feedback appreciated by the members become the preferred types of feedback shared. In many classrooms, the students do not share that responsibility; instead, it is the instructor, the person in a position of power, who determines the accepted practices of the group.

If the instructor does not place a high value on global praise or comments addressing grammar, students might feel discouraged to offer these types of comments. Unfortunately, these comments might actually have been helpful for students. As seen in this study, authors sometimes use praise, even when it might seem shallow to composition scholars, as validation and encouragement to

continue writing. Likewise, the members of Joe Bootcamp place a high value on comments concerning grammar and mechanics; for many, those types of comments were one of the reasons they joined the group in the first place. Students in composition classes also often feel underprepared as writers, particularly in areas of grammar and mechanics. When instructors de-emphasize grammar in peer review, even with their students' best interests in mind, they could inadvertently be frustrating students. After all, if writers outside the academy, such as the members of Joe Bootcamp, see editing and revision as interrelated and not as separate phases of the writing process, it is also likely that students, particularly first-year students, do as well. After all, fanfiction authors are writing and sharing their stories online, and in today's digital age, many authors find it easy to edit their papers as they compose. Perhaps it is time to acknowledge the value of editing as one writes, an idea fanfiction authors and composition students are already well aware of.

The most important lesson I learned during this study, however, is that feedback is an important part of any writing community of practice. While domain can vary greatly—producing *G.I. Joe* fanfiction to keep the fandom alive at Fanfiction.net and improving writing skills of members at Joe Bootcamp—feedback is essential to both. Whether it is Global Praise at Fanfiction.net that inspires authors or Reader's Needs and other more constructive criticism used in revision at Joe Bootcamp, feedback is an important practice of each community, almost as, if not more, essential to the community than the stories themselves. It is through feedback that members of the community interact, establishing and

refining the norms and practices of the community. Without feedback, it is possible that neither Fanfiction.net nor Joe Bootcamp would be communities of practice. Feedback is an essential practice of these fanfiction groups, offering further evidence that most authors can benefit from the feedback process.

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## Appendix A—Sample of Interview Questions

1. Do you actively write *G. I. Joe* fanfiction?
2. Do you participate in other fanfiction communities?
3. How long did you/have you written fanfiction?
4. Do you primarily post your stories to Joe Bootcamp? Why?
5. What do you most like about being a member of Bootcamp? What don't you like?
6. Do you post Joe fanfiction elsewhere?
7. Have you ever posted on Fanfiction.net?
8. Why do you write Joe fanfiction?
9. Have you ever had formal peer review training, such as in a classroom? If so, where?
10. Do you enjoy receiving feedback?
11. What types of feedback do you find most helpful?
12. Do you like giving feedback?
13. What types of feedback do you generally give?
14. How honest are you with your feedback?
15. Do you think the feedback you give is helpful to the writer?
16. How does giving feedback affect your own role as writer?
17. What do you think the responsibilities of a peer responder should be?
18. Do you often change what you have written because of feedback you have received? Can you give examples?