



[<< Return to article](#)

## Why Heather Can Write

Not everything kids learn from popular culture is bad for them: Some of the best writing instruction takes place outside the classroom in online communities.



By Henry Jenkins  
[Digital Renaissance](#)  
 February 6, 2004

When she was 13, Heather Lawver read a book that changed her life: *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. Inspired by reports that J. K. Rowling's novel was getting kids to read, she wanted to do her part to promote literacy. Less than a year later, she launched [The Daily Prophet](#), a Web-based "school newspaper" for the fictional Hogwarts. Today, the

publication has a staff of 102 children from all over the world.

▼ ADVERTISEMENT ▼



Lawver, still in her teens, is its managing editor. She hires columnists who cover their own beats on a weekly basis—everything from the latest Quiddich matches to Muggle cuisine—and edits each story. She encourages her staff to closely compare their original submissions with the edited versions and consults with them on issues of style and grammar as needed.

Heather, by the way, is a home schooler who hasn't set foot in a classroom since first grade.

My last two columns have centered on what parents and schools can do to help kids develop media literacy. This month, I will reverse directions and examine how participating in popular culture may help kids to master traditional literacy skills. We often act as if schools had a monopoly on teaching, yet smart kids have long known not to let schooling get in the way of their education.

Follow **technology** as it makes the leap from **research** to **marketplace**.



**Technology Review** puts you in touch with developments that are absolutely essential. See for yourself, click here and get **2 free trial issues now.**



AN MIT ENTERPRISE  
**TECHNOLOGY**  
 REVIEW

**SPONSORED LINKS**

[HP notebooks and desktops.](#)  
[Doctor-patient security.](#)

[RHT 2004 Salary Guide – The latest in salary trends!](#)

[Learn about the Qualcomm Launchpad™ Suite of application Technologies.](#)

[Is your salary competitive? RHT 2004 Salary Guide](#)

Teachers sometimes complain that popular culture competes for the attention of their students, a claim that starts from the assumption that what kids learn from media is less valuable than what schools teach. Here, however, much of what is being mastered are things that schools try—and too often fail—to teach their students. (It has been said that if schools taught sex education the same way they taught writing, the human race would die out in a generation.)

I will focus on high school aged kids who are reading, writing, editing, and critiquing Harry Potter fan fiction online. But keep in mind that such informal teaching occurs across a range of other online communities. We could, for example, talk about the important role the Riot Grrl subculture played in the early 1990s in helping teenage girls to develop technical competency at a time when cyberspace was still seen as a predominantly male domain; we could talk about young anime fans who are teaching each other Japanese language and culture in order to do underground subtitling of their favorite shows.

University of Wisconsin-Madison education professor James Gee calls such informal learning cultures "affinity spaces," asking why kids learn more, participate more actively, and engage more deeply with popular culture than they do with the contents of their textbooks. As one 16-year-old Harry Potter fan told me, "It's one thing to be discussing the theme of a short story you've never heard of before and couldn't care less about. It's another to be discussing the theme of your friend's 50,000-word opus about Harry and Hermione that they've spent three months writing."

I have studied and participated in fan communities, off and on, for more than two decades. Yet much of what I found when I recently turned my attention to Harry Potter fandom took my breath away. Ten years ago, published fan fiction came mostly from women in their twenties, thirties, and beyond. Today, these older writers have been joined by a generation of new contributors—kids who found fan fiction surfing the Internet and decided to see what they could produce.

Consider, for example, the girl known online as Flourish. She started reading X-Files fan fiction when she was 10, wrote her first Harry Potter stories at 12, and published her first online novel at 14. She quickly became a mentor for other emerging fan writers, including many who were twice her age or more. Most people assumed she was probably a college student. Interacting online allowed her to keep her age to herself until she had become so central to the fandom that nobody much cared that she was in middle school.

What difference will it make, over time, if a growing percentage of young writers begin publishing and getting feedback on their work while they are still in high school? And what happens when those young writers compare notes, becoming critics, editors, and mentors? Will they develop their craft more quickly—and develop a critical vocabulary for thinking about storytelling?

[FictionAlley](#), the largest Harry Potter archive, hosts more than 30,000 stories and book chapters, including hundreds of completed or partially completed novels. Its (unpaid) staff of more than 200 people includes 40 mentors who welcome each new participant individually. At the [Sugar Quill](#), another popular site, every posted story undergoes a peer-review process it calls "beta-reading." New writers often go through multiple drafts before their stories are ready for posting. "The beta-reader service has really helped me to get the adverbs out of my writing and get my prepositions in the right place and improve my sentence structure and refine the overall quality of

my writing," explains the girl who writes under the pen name Sweeney Agonistes—a college freshman with years of publishing behind her.

Like many of the other young writers, Agonistes says that Rowling's books provide her with a helpful creative scaffolding: "It's easier to develop a good sense of plot and characterization and other literary techniques if your reader already knows something of the world where the story takes place," she says. By poaching off Rowling, the writers are able to start with a well-established world and a set of familiar characters and thus are able to focus on other aspects of their craft. Often, unresolved issues in the books stimulate them to think through their own plots or to develop new insights into the characters.

Literary purists, of course, might question the wisdom of having kids develop as creative writers in this nontraditional way. But while there is certainly value in writing about one's own experiences, adolescents often have difficulty stepping outside themselves and seeing the world through other people's eyes. Their closeness to Harry and his friends makes it possible to get some critical distance from their own lives and think through their concerns from a new perspective. And writing about Harry offers them something else, too: an audience with a built-in interest in the stories—an interest that would be difficult to match with stories involving original fictional characters. The power of popular culture to command attention is being harnessed at a grassroots level to find a readership for these emerging storytellers.

Harry Potter fan fiction yields countless narratives of youth empowerment as characters fight back against the injustices their writers encounter everyday at school. Often, the young writers show a fascination with getting inside the heads of the adult characters. Many of the best stories are told from a teacher's perspective or depict Harry's parents and mentors when they were school aged. Some of the stories are sweetly romantic or bittersweet coming-of-age tales; others are charged with anger or budding sexual feelings, themes that could not be discussed so openly in a school assignment and that might be too embarrassing to address through personal narratives or original characters. As they discuss such stories, teen and adult fans talk openly about their life experiences, offering each other advice on more than just issues of plot or characterization. Having a set of shared characters creates a common ground that enables these conversations to occur in a more collaborative fashion.

Through online discussions of fan writing, the teen writers develop a vocabulary for talking about writing and they learn strategies for rewriting and improving their own work. When they talk about the books themselves, the teens make comparisons with other literary works or draw connections with philosophical and theological traditions; they debate gender stereotyping in the female characters; they cite interviews with the writer or read critiques of the works; they use analytic concepts they probably wouldn't encounter until they reached the advanced undergraduate classroom.

Not surprisingly, someone who has just published her first online novel and received dozens of comment-filled letters finds it disappointing to return to the classroom where her work will be read only by the teacher—whose feedback may dwell more on comma splices than character development. Some teens have confessed to smuggling drafts of stories to school in their textbooks and editing them during class; others sit around the lunch table talking plot and character issues with their classmates or try to work on the stories on the school computers until

the librarians accuse them of wasting time. They can't wait for the school bell to ring so they can focus on their writing.

It is not clear that these successes can be duplicated simply by incorporating similar activities into the classroom—though some teachers are using fan fiction exercises to motivate their students. Schools have less flexibility than the fan community does to support writers at very different stages of their development. Moreover, schools impose a fixed leadership hierarchy (including very different roles for adults and teens); it is unlikely that someone like Heather or Flourish would have had the same editorial opportunities that they have found through fandom.

Even the most progressive schools set limits on what students can write compared to the freedom they enjoy on their own. Certainly, teens may receive harsh critical responses to their more controversial stories when they publish them online, but the teens themselves are deciding what risks they want to take and facing the consequences of those decisions. The Harry Potter books are not universally welcomed into U.S. schools; they have been at the center of more textbook and library controversies over the past several years than any other book. The teen writers are acutely aware of those censorship struggles and many have decided, not to talk with parents and teachers about what they are writing. What the grown-ups don't know can't hurt them.

Some students say teachers have ridiculed them for the time they put into their fan writing; others complain of parents trying to protect them from the “demonic” influence of the books. But some teachers do care enough to read and give feedback on these stories. And there are supportive parents who fly with their sons and daughters to conventions where the young writers speak to rooms full of people about the story-writing craft. These teens don't need adults taking over their spaces—but they do need adults to respect and value what they are trying to do.

Many young fan writers aspire to professional writing careers; many are getting accepted into top colleges and pursuing educational goals that stem from their fan experiences. Fandom is providing a rich haven to support the development of bright young minds that might otherwise get chewed up by the system, and offering mentorship to help less gifted students to achieve their full expressive potential. Either way, these teens are finding something online that schools are not providing them.

---

Henry Jenkins is director of the Program in Comparative Media Studies at MIT.

Copyright 2004 Technology Review, Inc. All rights reserved