Brent Allison – Proposal for Learning from Anime Fans: Implications for Formal Media and Cultural Pedagogy

Japanese animation, known as *anime* by those in and out of Japan has made significant inroads into this country as a form of culture. In Japan, it is an ubiquitous facet of modern life that appears in character goods, television series, advertisements, and even pornography. In the United States, anime's scope, while widening over the past three decades, is still narrow enough to be the object of subcultural devotion. While other media subcultures are well established, U.S. anime fan subculture, or anime fandom, is unique in its adoration of a form of media that comes from a non-Anglophone country. Moreover, anime contains many references to the national culture of Japan, which most non-Japanese, including many U.S. anime fans, are confused by or simply unaware of.

Cultural references and other Japanese ideas related to gender, schooling, sexuality, the environment, and even war are not simply absorbed by a U.S. audience. An informal educational process is required to make these concepts sensible and applicable to a community of fans. That is, I conceive informal education as occurring outside of schools and without formalized, curriculum and instruction, but that nevertheless facilitates a transfer of knowledge, skills, and cultural ways of knowing and being (Dewey, 1944). This process is achieved in anime fandom through social interaction in anime fan conventions, online bulletin boards, and anime clubs.

This study employs ethnographic methods, specifically phenomenological interviewing and participant observation to address specific research questions on informal education and anime fandom. Namely:

- How do North American fans of Japanese animation (anime) learn to become anime fans, and what do they learn in this process?
- How do North American fans of anime create, sustain, and change meanings associated with anime and Japan within a self-conscious subcultural social network known as a fandom?
- How do North American anime fans negotiate traditional sites of sociocultural consensus and conflict found in U.S. social hierarchies, both as self-aware fans and as general members of wider local, national, and global societies?

My ongoing experiences as a researcher and participant of anime fandom have been key to formulating answers to these questions. My participation has taken place mainly in two university student anime clubs, as well as at various anime fan conventions and online in various bulletin board forums and email lists. There I engaged fellow anime fans in long and short interviews about their experiences of viewing anime and interacting with other fans. My findings are also informed by a yearlong exercise in participant observation that investigated fan viewing habits, reactions to anime, and interaction in various fan-related venues. Research on online communities devoted to anime and anime fandom was also an integral part of the data collection and analysis process.

My essay will demonstrate how informal education in U.S. anime fandom results in edifying fans' enjoyment of anime while engendering fans' reproduction and resistance of categories of power. These include gender, sexuality, race, nationalism, and media control. Specifically I discuss fans' interpretation of anime plots and characters, especially in their perceived relation to Japanese culture, within fandom interaction. Moreover, I explore how fans

educate each other on appreciation of anime as an aspect of Japanese popular culture. In turn, this pedagogy constructs a new understanding of Japanese identity that many fans adopt and critique as part of forming their own self-concepts as fans. I argue that, far from developing a singular and homogeneous concept of what an anime fan is supposed to be across fandom, anime fans develop different and competing categories of identities as fans. These are based not only on what sort of fannish activities they do, but also on how they link their appreciation of anime to sites of social and cultural conflict on which they stake out individual and collective positions.

Currently there is at least one anime convention per week in the United States, anime occupies more programming slots on television than ever before, and there is a steady growth of participation of children and youth in online and offline communities devoted to anime. The potential for cultural (mis)education for U.S. students continually interacting with a popular cultural product from Japan, and marketed as such in the U.S., is significant in an era of global cultural commodification. Beyond as an exercise in youth leisure time, anime fandom can inform school practitioners of a different means of cultural education that can challenge and reinforce their own attempts at challenging categories of power and promoting international understanding and social change.

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