

C&C AND FANDOM SQUEE: CONSIDERING FANFICTION READER REVIEWS ON THE
DATABASE ARCHIVE OF OUR OWN AS A MODEL FOR TEACHING POSITIVE
CLASSROOM WRITING FEEDBACK

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As a high school Creative Writing teacher, I am always on the lookout for new ways to help my students develop their constructive criticism skills, but every year without fail, the first time I mention that we will be engaging in “peer review,” my students respond with a collective groan. At least one budding writer will tentatively raise their hand to ask “do we have to” while their peers await my reaction with baited breath, for as eager as they are to express themselves, the fear of being judged by others students who might find their writing wanting is a prospect too daunting for them to consider. The negativity my students associate with the process of reviewing each other’s work is a hurdle I must overcome every year with a new set of aspiring authors, and every year, I find myself looking for inspiration to a seemingly unlikely source: online fanfiction archives.

Fanfiction -- narrative and poetic works inspired by the works of another author -- traces its roots at least as far back as the 1920s and the rise of science fiction magazines, but its history may be traced all the way to Alexander the Great who was said to have enjoyed writing his own versions of Homer’s tales of Achilles and Patroclus (Blakemore). These transformative works are housed on a myriad of databases across the World Wide Web, and they garner hundreds of reviews by amateur readers each day. One such is Archive of Our Own (or AO3), a relatively new database when compared to older fanfiction archives like FanFiction.net which traces its roots to 1998. Archive of Our Own was established in 2008 by members of multiple fan

communities looking to create a database that would provide access to and preserve the history of fanworks and fan culture in its many forms (About the OTW). This website, which now houses thousands of stories, is a nonprofit, noncommercial endeavor that does not charge its users for its services and never uses advertisements. It is accessible to readers of all ages and functions as a limited social media platform where interested parties can read, review, bookmark, leave “kudos,” and message authors. Although the works archived on this site are not professionally published and there are no editing requirements regulating the content posted, the works housed here are narrative texts which span many genres and styles, some rivaling volumes like Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* in length.

One function that AO3 provides to its users is the ability to post comments that are then directly linked to the work of fiction the comment is responding to. Future readers have the ability to view these comments as they read, and the authors themselves are notified each time a new comment is posted in association with their writing. While some works on this database will garner only a dozen comments over the course of their Internet lifetime, others have collected thousands of reviews from fellow fans all over the world. AO3 is not the first fanfiction database to allow for reader reviews: FanFiction.net (mentioned above) has a similar feature, as does Wattpad (a favorite among many of my high school students). What makes AO3 unique, I believe, can be traced back to its mission statement.

According to their “About” page, AO3 was founded with the understanding that its creation would serve to “preserve our fannish economy, values, and creative expression by protecting and nurturing our fellow fans, our work, our commentary, our history, and our identity while providing the broadest possible access to fannish activity for all fans” (About the OTW). While databases like FanFiction.net similarly serve as platforms for fanwork publication, AO3 is

unique in its purposeful aim to support fan communities by not only serving as a database for digital literature but as a venue for commentary on those works -- commentary which includes active engagement in the form of reader reviews as well as the conversations that those reviews encourage between the readers of the “fics” and the authors themselves in the form of “replies.”

It is my desire as both a literary scholar and as a writing teacher to take a closer look at exactly *how* a database like Archive of Our Own achieves this lofty goal, for it is a goal that I wish to replicate within my own classroom. In this essay, I will consider the format and functionality of reader reviews specific to works of fanfiction, focusing on feedback that has been published using the online database Archive of Our Own, and attempt to posit what it is about that form and function that produces positive, productive results. Since I cannot possibly analyze reader reviews for every single story published on AO3, I will examine reader comment threads for the story “Breathe Easy,” a 30,018-word extension of the Adventure Zone fandom¹ written by author raychleadele² and published on Archive of Our Own in July 2018. This work has been read by over seven thousand users since its original publication and has garnered 633 comments which will provide ample fodder for my analytical needs. I will be utilizing Stephen Bax’s broad heuristic for analyzing discourse, considering first what the text achieves or aims to achieve; next, how it achieves that impact; and finally, why the text seeks to do this in the first place. I will also refer to Louise Rosenblatt’s reader-response theory as a means of discussing fanfiction as aesthetic reading which in turn elicits writing in the form of reviews from fellow members of the fan community. Although much of my research may apply to reader responses to

¹ A fandom may be defined as a collective group of individuals engaged in intercourse surrounding a specific medium: in this case, fans of the actual play TTRPG (table-top role-playing game) podcast “The Adventure Zone.”

² This is a pseudonym used by the author as an identifier on Archive of Our Own. Real names have been left out of this essay with respect for the anonymity of that database and will only be used with express permission from the individuals themselves.

fanfiction in a broad sense, the examples that I use to back my claims will come from the comments to “Breathe Easy” and will, necessarily, be specific to that story and fandom. I will do my best to acknowledge when it is the case that a claim being made is specific to this story’s reader response and when it may be broadly applied to the genre at large.

Within the last decade, there has been a rising interest in using fanfiction within classroom environments (both in K-12 as well as college level courses) to teach various language and literacy skills and to engage otherwise-hesitant writers to develop their own narrative voice by first mimicking the voices of other writers (Sauro and Sundmark 41). For example, one scholar who considers fanfiction as a medium for conversations about writing within the classroom setting is Fay Jessop, who wrote about allowing her students to explore the various forms and features of narrative writing by incorporating a unit on writing fanfiction into her high school curriculum. Fay Jessop wrote about allowing her students to explore the various forms and features of narrative writing by incorporating a unit on writing fanfiction into her high school curriculum. Her goal to “integrate the skills-based work that is so essential to teaching the craft of narrative writing with tasks that explored fanfiction codes and conventions” was ultimately a success: her students found confidence in writing within fandoms that appealed to them, studying and mirroring stylistic traits from writers whose books filled their own shelves (Jessop 31). While I am fascinated by the idea of using fanfiction in the classroom -- and have myself done a similar unit with my Creative Writing students to encourage them to play around with different types of fiction writing -- I have noticed that there is a dearth of research that goes deeper still, that looks not just at fanfiction itself but at the paratext of reader reviews that such works garner online as a tool to inform contemporary writing curricula.

Scholars like Alecia Marie Magnifico, Jen Scott Curwood and Jayne C. Lammers consider the format of user-generated reviews of fanfiction in their article “Words on the screen: broadening analyses of interactions among fanfiction writers and reviewers,³” but their focus is on reviews specific to the websites FanFiction.net and Figment and is ultimately critical of the “thin praise” they claim is inherent of fanfiction reader reviews in general. Aside from Judith Fathallah’s 2020 article “Digital Fanfic in Negotiation: LiveJournal, Archive of Our Own, and the Affordances of Read–write Platforms,” literary scholars have not spent much time examining the nuances of reviews on this particular website. Fathallah’s essay focuses largely on Archive of Our Own’s functionality -- specifically, the way that the archive allows for digital downloads of texts while preserving the reader’s ability to follow tags to related works of fiction (Fathallah 858). While this focus on the interface itself is fascinating, I am less concerned with the actual format of AO3 and more interested in how that format (through the comment and “kudos” function) serves to facilitate a linguistically unique conversation between author and reader. Ultimately, these conversations create a healthy and inclusive online fan community that nurtures the skill development of both new and established writers working to create fiction within that community -- and it is the way in which they do this, viewed through the lens of Stephen Bax’s broad heuristic for analyzing discourse, that will be the purview of this essay.

Reader Review as Emotional Catharsis

So what, then, is the purpose of reader reviews on a website like Archive of Our Own? Why does it exist at all and how does its existence serve to further the purpose of supporting and

³ Magnifico, Alecia Marie, Jen Scott Curwood, and Jayne C Lammers. “Words on the Screen: Broadening Analyses of Interactions Among Fanfiction Writers and Reviewers.” *Literacy* (Oxford, England) 49.3 (2015): 158–166. Web.

nurturing fan writers who publish on its platform? Perhaps the first purpose that a casual perusal of reader responses to a work like “Breathe Easy” may be said to serve is that of emotional catharsis for readers who look to fanfiction as a means of supplementing and “correcting” the fictional canon. As has been previously stated, fanfiction is at its core a reaction to the need among devotees of a certain work (be it a television program, film, book, podcast, etc.) to engage with the world of that creation. The emotional investment that is inherent in involvement within a fandom may manifest in many ways: there are pages upon pages of Tumblr blogs devoted to fans who do nothing but write meta analyses of “Supernatural,” fan-pages celebrating favorite characters as though they were real-life celebrities, and Twitter feeds whose sole purpose is to circulate animated GIFs proving the existence of their OTP (or “one true pairing”). This investment must have a catharsis, particularly for those fans who wish to expand canon, creating and supporting “ships” and inventing “missing scenes” that the original work did not explore. Fanfiction makes this goal possible, and the emotional release of reading and then commenting – whether the comment is a celebration or a rejection of the work – is one of the main purposes of reader reviews on a website like AO3.

We may see this first-hand by perusing the comments of “Breathe Easy,” a story which situates itself within the extended universe of “The Adventure Zone.” Nicknamed “TAZ” by its followers, “The Adventure Zone” is a joint storytelling venture podcast based on the Dungeons & Dragons gaming system and played “live” by three brothers and their fathers. “Breathe Easy” imagines a handful of beloved main characters existing in the years after the canonical ending of the podcast’s storyline, involves several romantic pairings that are popular among the fan community, and is itself a work that appeals to reader pathos through a series of emotionally-charged scenes and moments of introspection. The majority of the comments therefore are,

unsurprisingly, expressions of emotional explosion, often expressed with caps-locked phrases to denote the level of feeling behind the words. Common as well are users who begin or end their comments with a series of seemingly-random letters that, taken in context, are meant less as a specific sentiment and more as expressions of uncontainable emotion (usually excitement or shock). An example of this may be seen in the response from a user with the pseudonym *enduringreality* who wrote “SDJFKJSNDKMS MY DUDE WHAT. I CANT BELIEVE YOU DID THIS EAGERLY AWAITING THE NEXT INSTALLMENT⁴.” Prevalent also is the use of extraneous exclamation points and question marks used primarily for emphasis, as when user *Secretkemi* writes “hey what the frick!!!! what the heck!!!! what depth of heck did this idea come from!!!!!!!!!!”

This level of emotional investment may be said to reflect Rosenblatt’s theory of reading as either aesthetic, in which “a reader approaches a text seeking to enjoy its formal characteristics, rhythms, word choices, images and connotations,” or efferent and “motivated by the reader’ purpose to acquire information from the text and retain it after the reading event in order to complete a procedure” (Savoleinan 442). Seen through this lens and in the context of the above, fanfiction serves largely as aesthetic reading, and the reader reviews that come out of engagement with such texts are far more likely to focus on emotional reactions and individual experiences with the text than on the actual content in a way that is informational or critical. This is in direct contrast to user-generated reader reviews of literature on websites like GoodReads where reviewers are ultimately aiming “to convey their opinions in order to influence other individuals’ reading choices” (Hajibayova 612). On Archive of Our Own, reviews are less about critique: in fact, there is not a single reader review of “breathe easy” that sets about summarizing

⁴ All comments have been reproduced as they appear on Archive of Our Own; any errors in spelling or confusion of syntax has been preserved in order to respect the original reviewer’s intent.

the content of the story with the purpose of urging (or discouraging) other readers to engage with the text. The purpose of recommending a piece of fanfiction to other users of the archive is achieved through the bookmarking feature⁵ and not through the reviews themselves. The “kudos” feature may also be viewed in this light: by clicking on the “Kudos ♥” button at the bottom of a page of fanfiction, readers may show their appreciation for the text and that appreciation is, in turn, publicly displayed any time the work appears in a search of the archive’s content.

Fandom Engagement via Intertextuality

Another purpose which reader responses on AO3 aims to achieve is an engagement in the fandom community that transcends the individual work. On a very basic level, readers comment in order to engage in the widening of canon which is the ultimate purpose of fanfiction. Just as the author of a piece of fanfiction is allowed to expand on the canon of the original source text, altering plot-lines and exploring character development that may or may not be found in the hypotext⁶, so too can readers use their comments to propose changes to the story, express their hopes for its development, call out the author when they feel an element of the story seems out of

⁵ The “bookmarking feature” is a button at the top of each page which allows a user of Archive of Our Own to designate a text as “bookmarked.” Once done, that work (along with a link to the full text) shows up on the user’s profile page which can be accessed by anyone with a membership to AO3. The number of times a work of fanfiction has been “bookmarked” is displayed alongside the title and summary of the text in its listing on the archive. To be bookmarked is to be deemed worthy of a future revisitation and may thus be viewed as an informal recommendation function between users of the site.

⁶ Linguistics defines a hypotext as an earlier text which serves as the original or reference text for subsequent pieces of literature -- in this case, fan-created media based on the Adventure Zone podcast. The texts which owe their existence to the originating text are referred to as “hypertexts.”

character (or OOC), and advocate for their favorite ships (romantic pairings between two or more characters). In this way, fanfiction comments are as much a part of the ongoing development of fandom as fanfiction itself, and for those fans who may not find themselves personally gifted in the art of storytelling, it is these comments which allow them an outlet to be a part of that conversation.

This purpose is achieved largely through the use of intertextuality which is, of course, inherent in any work of fanfiction that is an outgrowth of an original text, unable to stand alone unless read against the backdrop of the hypotext (Lindgren Leavenworth, "Paratext" 43). In order to understand and fully appreciate a work of fanfiction, one must have at least a basic understanding of canon, and as such, the readers who comment on these stories are constantly referring back to the source as they describe their reactions to what they have read. This may be seen in the comment of user tracerTrash413 where they reflect on what they know about the character of Kravitz, an undead reaper and boyfriend to the main character, and speculate on how his experiences within the canonical world of *The Adventure Zone* justifies his actions: "hes just like. lost. which is so fair bc its not like hes done a whole lot in this realm but hunt necromancers down since he fuckin died, of course he wouldn't know too well how to deal with what's pretty much his anchor in this realm being awol." The reader is not only agreeing with the author's choice of characterization, but by referencing the canon, they are helping to create the "fanon" (or fandom compliant) representation of Kravitz as a character who would justifiably be terrible at responding to crisis even though, in the original text, Kravitz has been shown to be nothing but capable.

It is also in the nature of fanfiction to encourage intertextuality that goes beyond the canon text and touches other fandoms, as well. *The Adventure Zone* podcast is itself a tribute to

nerd culture, its hosts constantly referencing favorite celebrities, television shows, and books that help to inform the world that they have created. It is, then, no surprise when fans of the show who come to comment on a story like “Breathe Easy” weave references to other fandoms into their comments as a way to connect with peers and better express their feelings in terms that other readers and the author can understand. Allusions to these other fandoms abound in the comment section of “Breathe Easy,” as when user madelinescribbles quotes a conversation from the television program “Parks & Recreation” in lieu of leaving an actual review of their own. It is understood by the user that the author and any other commenters who may come across their response will recognize the reference and appreciate its relevance as a piece of dialogue that transcends “Parks and Recreation” and weaves seamlessly into a discourse on “The Adventure Zone.”

When one considers the way that fan communities online serve as focal language discourse groups⁷, it is only natural to consider the way that the lexicology of fan communities further allows readers of fanfiction to engage with their fandom. Each fan community has its own lexicon, a vocabulary that may initially seem indecipherable to an outsider. Some terminology is shared across fan communities: the term OTP, or “one true pairing,” is common to almost every fan community that has a fanfiction base; a “ship, as previously mentioned, is a phenomenon that fans across many forms of media recognize; and the fanfiction concept of an “AU” (or alternate universe), where the canon is ignored in order to place characters into scenarios and worlds that they do not encounter in the hypotext, is a recognizable sub-type of fanfiction that extends across the fan works community as a whole. Stepping into the comments section of a piece of fanfiction, then, can feel like walking into an oasis, a special, private corner

⁷ In other words, groups of individuals using a common, specialized language (or lexicon) that may seem foreign to those outside of that particular group.

of the Internet where everyone speaks the same language and there is no risk of judgment from outsiders. We may see this most prominently in the way that users like pistachioinfernal casually refer to the canon as “TAZ,” how the author references “Blupjeans” as the recognized, official name for the romantic pairing of two characters whose names are Barry Bluejeans and Lup, and in the way that CrowCorvus is able to write simply “I LOVE MY BIRD GOD MOM” -- a reference to the fandom nickname for the Goddess of Death -- and be immediately understood by rachleadele who replies “BIRD MOM IS BEST MOM.” I posit that it is this very usage of a shared lexicology that opens the line of communication between reader and author and allows for two otherwise-strangers to engage in a conversation which may (in some cases) transition from pure commentary to something more productive -- actual constructive criticism made acceptable through the intimacy of a shared language.

Reader Reviews as Constructive Criticism

Reader responses to fanfiction like “Breathe Easy” aim to allow fans to engage in their fandom through the inclusion of constructive criticism and polite suggestions and critique from those same readers. Fanfiction is inherently a very individualized form of writing where two authors composing works about the same characters might develop wildly different stories that manage to coexist without conflict because the “death of the author” is understood and variant interpretations are actually encouraged. This does not, however, stop commenters from including notes about what they think *should* have happened, what they hope *will* happen, and what they think *should not* have happened in a work of fanfiction. By expressing these feelings, usually accompanied by the phrase “I think” or “in my opinion,” the reader is engaging in a discourse where their opinion is one additional building block constructing the fandom narrative. Although the comments section on “Breathe Easy” is populated by positive feedback – indeed, the lack of

overt criticism is as surprising as it is impressive – many readers take the time to provide the author with their suggestions and desires for the story ahead, such as user InterNutter who responds to one chapter by saying “They just have to remember that Taako has Garyl and Blink. And loads of other spells up his sleeve.” The author acknowledges in a reply that she had not considered the fact that the protagonist has a spectral horse that he could be using to travel, thus allowing the reader agency in developing not only the canon but the hypertext itself.

This also contributes to the aim of reader commentary which is to create an ongoing conversation that develops and enriches works of fan-made fiction through author-reader engagement. Authors like raychleadele are able, through the Archive of Our Own platform, to reply to comments left on their stories, and although not all authors choose to do so, rachleadele is certainly an example of a fan writer who takes the time to react to each and every piece of feedback, no matter how trivial. This results in the creation of adjacency pairs initiated by the commenter who, in leaving feedback on a story, opens their review up to the possibility of a conversation with the author. These conversations may be brief in nature, as when user deadboy4000 left a frowny-face emoticon and raychleadele responded in kind with “<3,” a heart emoji. Reviewers who leave questions in their comments have the potential to receive a preferred pair response where the author responds directly to their query or (in the case of InterNutter who asked at the end of a particularly fractious scene, “Is it going to be a big, noisy argument? Or a Benny Hill chase? Or Taako noping out of everything with Blink?”), the response might be a nonpreferred pair where the author chooses to heighten the reader’s suspense by replying vaguely or by reacting as raychleadele did here with a humorous observation rather than an affirmation or negative.

Such epitextual conversations -- that is, discourse which develops outside of the text itself in the form of reviews, author interviews, or academic footnotes -- may also develop, as Maria Lindgren Leavenworth observed when analyzing the work of a writer within the fan community surrounding the HBO series *True Blood*, into “exchanges of a more emotional nature indicative of a move from public to private” (Lindgren Leavenworth, “Reader” 55). Rather than confining their responses exclusively to textual analysis and commentary, many readers will use their responses to insert personal anecdotes and intimate reflections on how the story made them feel as yet another way of engaging with the fandom. Likewise, the author herself may do the same when replying to a reviewer, a choice which may be said to appeal to both the pathos as well as the ethos of the original commenter, proving that the author is qualified to write about such topics as trauma and loss (as when an author justifies a difficult character choice by revealing that they, too, have been in a similar situation) and in so doing appeal to the emotions of their reader through the intimacy of such a reveal. Author raychleadele does this a few times in the comments section of “Breathe Easy,” perhaps most notably after a reviewer questioned a character’s sensory response to another character when they met back up after long period of absence. Rather than attempt to argue or become defensive, raychleadele justifies her narrative choice by relating an anecdote about being apart from her own husband and how, when they were reunited, the first thing she noticed was his familiar smell. Not only was she able to shut down any further criticism from her reviewers without actively antagonizing them, but she was also able to engage in a relatable conversation about relations and intimacy that ultimately strengthened the believability and reception of her story.

Reader Review as Encouragement

One final aim of these texts is one which the database Archive of Our Own shares in its own mission statement. Just as the database works to encourage and support creators of fan works, so too do reader comments: through words of encouragement, emphatic pleas to continue writing, and the very act of leaving a comment after reading, readers of works like “Breathe Easy” help to ensure that fan writers will continue to produce new work despite the lack of monetary remuneration or the hope of real-world print publication. Comments from users like saturners do just this: in lieu of an actual review, saturners writes, “you ever read a fic so good you have to force your eyes to read all of the glorious words and not skip ahead paragraphs at a time? you ever read a fic so good you make an ao3 account just to tell the author how fucking good it is? you ever read a fic so good your parents get concerned at the expressions you're making? this is that fic.” A grateful raychleadele replies, “Holy shit??? This is the greatest comment, thank you!!! I know those feelings as a reader, and knowing my fic did that for you is an incredible feeling!” The author’s response is emphatic and appreciative and further proves the importance of reader comments in validating the work of unpaid fan artists.

Conclusion

My own Creative Writing classroom, it turns out, is not so very different from the fandom communities that interact daily on AO3 and similar websites. My students arrive on day one a disparate group of individuals with their own interests, their own goals as writers, and their own familiarity with the process of creating new work. Like the authors and reviewers on AO3, they come to me from different grade levels and different backgrounds, life-long writers side-by-side with closet poets and newcomers who have never considered writing as being something

one can do for pleasure alone. Some are eager to start writing and vocal about their love of literature and reading; others are shy, soft-spoken, and unsure whether their writing abilities are up to the challenge of a year-long course in creative composition. Each one brings a unique passion to the table when we begin our writing workshops, and while they don't always share each other's obsessions (the sci-fi fans turning a skeptical eye on the romance writers in their midst as the horror buffs look askance at the slam poetry nerds), they acknowledge the fanatic in one another and ultimately meet on the common ground of their desire to create.

Over the course of the year, a strange and wonderful evolution happens in my classroom. Students who started the course as strangers become friends through the shared intimacy of the writing process, coming together each day to celebrate one another's achievements and to push their classmates to produce new work for the sheer joy of being able to share that work when it's done. Spending just an hour together each day, they create a lexicon of inside jokes that transforms our classroom into its own miniature focal language discourse group, a microcosm of creativity that celebrates the strange and unusual and makes it acceptable within our four walls to explore new forms of expression without fear of judgment or ridicule. The works they create are bound up within a fascinating system of intertextuality where a character created in a warm-up exercise in August might resurface to the delight of the class in a piece of long-form poetry in May. I wage my own constant campaign of professorial reassurance, but in the end, they are each other's loudest cheerleaders and most fervent supporters.

I am, of course, constantly working to give them my students skills that will make them "better" writers: grammar workshops to ensure that they put their quotation marks in the right places and mini-lessons on form and content to help them understand the nuances of genre. But before any of that can take place, my students must be allowed to experience the sheer joy of

writing and to be allowed to translate that joy into an enthusiasm for feedback that encourages them to become champions of their classmates' work. It is that same enthusiasm and encouragement that I see in the reader reviews on Archive of Our Own, a database which has created for itself a unique genre within the wider community of online reader reviews. It is, at its core, a safe space for sharing original works of fiction, evidenced by the format of comments such as the ones I have analyzed here which involve profound amounts of emotional catharsis, intertextuality, constructive criticism, and -- perhaps most important of all -- encouragement. It is just such a safe space that I work to create within my brick-and-mortar classroom.

In my study of Archive of Our Own, I have come to challenge what Magnifico, Curwood, and Lammers ultimately concluded in "Words on the Screen." While it is their belief that "the commonality of relatively thin praise under the guise of 'reviewing'" on fanfiction databases merely emphasizes the need for "teachers' expertise [...] in the difficult task of developing students' skills in writing, peer review and critique," I cannot help but think that they give reader reviews too little credit (Magnifico et al. 165). A premium cannot possibly be placed on the value of positive reinforcement from their peers for young writers, particularly those who come to the task with low self-esteem and a hesitation to share work that might not be "good enough." It is only by starting at a place of enthusiasm and praise that we as teachers can begin to introduce techniques for constructive criticism, introducing rubrics that students may use when evaluating each others' work while reserving space within that critique for making personal connections and delivering enthusiastic accolades.

Further study is needed to determine the best strategies for creating a happy medium between the unbridled catharsis of fanfiction reader review-style commentary and formal, content-critical feedback. It is my hope that this essay may prove a humble contribution to that

lofty but essential goal of transforming our writing classrooms into safe spaces for creative expression.

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