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New literacies and technology in the classroom: a look into  
integrating out-of-the-class fan practices to  
the formal classroomEva Fernanda Sepúlveda Carballo<sup>i</sup>

## Abstract

Modern student participation in online affinity spaces, fandoms, requires that students employ different sets of skills and abilities to find, create and share information in these spaces; also known as digital literacies. Language teachers have to acknowledge that informal online learning is a reality, and that the Internet serves as a new context for learning languages. The context of fan communities is a great place to start because there are direct interactions between fan content creators and consumers. These practices have a structure and include certain interactions that will allow students to explore their topic of interest in a foreign language while having a clear and genuine task to accomplish. Although significant suggestions have been reported, it remains a field that requires further inspection on how out-of-class online practices can be integrated into the formal classroom while respecting fandom culture and its practices and interactions among the members of the community. This article intends to raise awareness of the benefits that online fan communities have on EFL learners' learning experience and the relevance of fostering a connection between the classroom and these extramural English practices.

**Keywords:** *digital literacies; affinity spaces; EFL; learning-beyond-the-classroom (LBC); fandom; online fan communities; fan fiction; fan art*

*Alfabetización digital y tecnología en el aula de clase: un vistazo a la  
integración de prácticas out-of-class de fans en línea al salón de clase*

## Resumen

La actual participación de estudiantes en espacios de afinidad, *fandoms*, requiere que utilicen diferentes sets de habilidades para buscar, crear y compartir información; también conocidas como alfabetización digital. Los profesores de lenguas deben reconocer que el aprendizaje informal en línea es una realidad y que el Internet sirve como nuevo contexto para aprender lenguas. El contexto de las comunidades de fans es un buen lugar para empezar gracias a que hay interacción directa entre creadores y consumidores de contenido. Estas prácticas tienen una estructura e interacción que permitirá a los estudiantes explorar un tema de interés a través de una lengua extranjera, al mismo tiempo que tienen metas claras y objetivas por cumplir. A pesar de que se han reportado relevantes sugerencias, aún hay mucho campo por explorar para integrar estas prácticas en el salón de manera que se respete su naturaleza, así como su cultura e interacciones entre los miembros de la comunidad. Este artículo trata de concientizar sobre los beneficios que las comunidades de fans tienen en las experiencias de aprendizaje de los estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera y su relevancia al promover la conexión entre las prácticas del salón de clases de inglés y el trabajo extraclase.

**Palabras clave:** *alfabetización digital; espacios de afinidad; Aprendizaje del inglés como lengua extranjera; learning-beyond-the-classroom (LBC); fandom; comunidades de fans online; fan fiction; fan art.*

## Introduction

The relationship between life and technology is one of constant change and mutual understanding. Over the last three decades, to be proficient in a technologically advanced world, humans have found themselves in the need to develop new sets of skills. These sets of skills are usually referred to as New Literacies or Digital Literacies.

As the contexts and opportunities for learning language shift, moving away from the traditional, often formal setting of a classroom, it is imperative that research in the area demonstrates change along with them (Hockly, 2015). However, this requires the students who are involved in informal online learning to be familiarised with digital literacies. Recent studies indicate that “learners are still impacted by the task of engaging in learning environments that are new to them and can even resist engagement with and persistence of using such technologies unless they feel comfortable and confident” (Gyamfi & Sukseemuang, 2018 as cited in Ramsin & Mayall, 2019). Otherwise, the learning experience may be hindered as it demands more extra work from students in order to get used to new learning environments.

Therefore, the purpose of this research synthesis is to raise awareness of the benefits that online fan communities have on EFL learners’ learning experience and the relevance to fostering a connection between the classroom and these extramural English practices. To achieve this; first, there is a concise description of the main problem of the study and research questions; then, a summarised look at the term New/Digital Literacies is presented: its conception, its evolution through time, and the definition that will be used throughout this paper; then, the relevance of digital literacies in the context of language learning; and lastly, an overview of Learning Beyond the Classroom, its characteristics, and current challenges.

As a concluding segment, there is a reflective piece on the findings that this research synthesis has provided.

## Problem of the study

In the current day, technology has changed from being a luxury few can afford to a necessity. In a world where technology has such an impact, people need to work on new skills to thrive in their digital lives. However, it is known that just adding technology into the classroom does not grant success. The reason for using fan communities as a medium to learn a language and at the same time develop digital literacies is because they bring a genuine context for students to look for information, transform and share it with a community as well

as engage in real linguistic exchanges with other members of the community. It is then, that this paper seeks to answer some of the following questions by proposing the use of fan practices in online communities in the formal classroom:

### Research questions

1. How can teachers foster a connection between formal language teaching and fan practices while respecting the authenticity of the community?
2. How can L2 learning in informal online spaces be evaluated in the classroom?

### Research Synthesis

#### Digital Literacies

In order to gain a better understanding of the concept of Digital literacies, it is important to note that this is not a new term that arose in the last few years. The term New Literacies, which would later on gain traction as Digital literacies, had already been in use since the early 90s by multiple scholars.

Lanham (1995) described the New Literacies to be “multimedia literacy,” the reasoning behind this idea was that information from a digital source could be translated into different media: images, texts, sounds, and more. These new mediums of information required a new set of skills to be interpreted; therefore, he described a digitally-literate as “being skilled at deciphering complex images and sounds as well as the syntactical subtleties of words” (Lanham, 1995, p. 200). Additionally, he stated that a digitally literate person “must know what kinds of expression fit what kinds of knowledge and become skilled at presenting information in the medium that audience will find easiest to understand” (ibid.). Adding to this idea, we have Lankshear and Knobel who said that Digital Literacy is what allows people to select the best medium to share information (Lankshear & Knobel, 2015). However, Bawden (2008) explained that these explanations could be restrictive since they were bound to the technology of that time.

It is important to add some notes about literacy. Gilster (1997) stated that the meaning of literacy had changed; it did no longer refer to just being able to read: “it has always meant the ability to read with meaning, and to understand” (p. 9). Moreover, he compared the brand new Internet with the then mainstream communication media such as television and the radio, where the latter required a passive behaviour from the users; they consumed the information

that was being presented without giving close to nothing in exchange. This author also stated that the point where the internet deviates from other sources is in the responsibility it gives to the consumer, who stops being just a spectator to become an Internet user: “people who discover and evaluate content before deciding how to put it to work” (p.9).

After such comparison, Digital literacy was defined as “the ability to understand and use information in multiple formats from a wide range of sources when it is presented via computers” (Gilster, 1997, p. 9). It was in this definition that a relation between Lanham’s definition of New Literacies and Gilster’s Digital literacies appeared; both of them agreed on the use of multiple media to access and share information. What made Gilster’s broad definition of the term different from Lanham’s was that it was vague to be applied to different contexts since it did not have a list of competencies to adhere to (Bawden, 2008). It was not that Gilster never mentioned any specific competencies; it was the opposite, he briefly mentioned the competencies expected from a digitally-literate person: Internet searching, hypertext navigation, knowledge assembly, and content evaluation. He then affirmed that “developing search skills is the final core competency” (Digital Literacies, 1998). From this statement Gilster explained that critical thinking is one of the most essential abilities when using the internet; the user needs to be able to make judgments of the information that they encounter on the internet as there are many sources; furthermore, how the user decides to interpret the information from these sources will shape their use of the information found online.

And although Gilster himself did not provide a detailed list of competencies; in his article titled *Information and digital literacies: a review of concepts*, Bawden (2001) mentions a summary of the core competencies mentioned by Gilster:

the ability to make informed judgements about what is found on-line, skills of reading and understanding in a dynamic and non-sequential hypertext environment, knowledge of assembly skills, searching skills, managing the ‘multimedia flow’, using information filters and agents, creating a ‘personal information strategy’, an awareness of other people and our expanded ability [through networks] to contact them to discuss issues and get help, being able to understand a problem and develop a set of questions that will solve that information need, understanding of backing up traditional forms of content with networked tools, and wariness in judging validity and completeness of material referenced by hypertext links. (p. 240)

It is in the interest of this paper to highlight the competency regarding ‘people network’. In the words of Gilster (1997), Digital literacy involves the combination of the acknowledgement of other people and the ability to connect with them to express ideas and help one another; simultaneously, it also refers to the awareness we have of how the internet gets old forms of knowledge with new ones. Gilster’s work became a solid foundation for other researchers to step in and expand on the topic. It is also important to highlight that Knobel and Lankshear have become the two major exponents of Digital Literacies in the last decade.

In 2006, Knobel and Lankshear described these literacies to be “socially recognized ways of generating, communicating and negotiating meaningful content through the medium of encoded texts within contexts of participating in Discourses (or, as members of Discourses)” (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006, p. 64). This definition refers to the affinity spaces aspect of new literacies, which will be covered in more detail later on.

Taking into consideration the contributions of Lanham and Gilster, in 2015 Lankshear and Knobel brought a sociocultural critique of the mainstream definitions of Digital Literacy. They outlined what they considered to be the three main features of those mainstream definitions. First, they explain that Digital Literacy is concerned with information, specifically in the creation and communication of it: the first one is defined as “the ability to generate information by adapting, applying, designing, or inventing information in ICT environments.” (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006, p. 14); whereas the communication part is described as being skilled in using and communicating electronic information with a specific audience and context in mind (Lankshear & Knobel, 2015)

Secondly, since digital literacy involves handling information, it requires the user to be able to “assess its truth (validity), credibility, reliability and so on” (ibid.) And thirdly, most mainstream definitions treat digital literacy as an ‘It’; Digital Literacy becomes a thing, be it a skill or an ability or a set of these; it becomes something that the user either lacks or has. And since it is something that can be possessed, the people who ‘lack’ it can get it. It is by having ‘it’ that people benefit from being able to effectively find and use the information and consequently reproduce said information in a different context, through a different medium.

However, Lankshear and Knobel’s argument was that such parameters were extremely limiting; to narrow the term to such simple techniques, abilities, and skills was to ignore its complexity. Especially when it comes to seeing ‘It’ as a thing that can be acquired. Instead, they claimed that although important, literacy was not only composed of skills and technique

and that the important thing to note was that said skills and techniques, depending on what the social practice was, would take on different forms (2006, p.13). They clearly exemplified this by making a cultural comparison between writing tasks; writing a thesis is different from writing a shopping list, even though the core 'skill', encoding text, is present in both, they are ultimately completely different. They concluded that there was not one single literacy, but rather literacies. Therefore, the term Digital Literacy should be used to refer to "the myriad social practices and conceptions of engaging in meaning-making mediated by texts that are produced, received, distributed, exchanged via digital codification" (p.13). This definition of digital literacies is what allows us to make a connection between the use of technology and multiple mediums and the English classroom; a look into the integration of said social practices and the texts that are related to them into the English as a foreign language classroom.

### **Digital Literacies and technology in TESOL**

The incorporation of technology to the classroom is nothing new; from overhead projectors and CD players to smart whiteboards and Learning Management Systems, as technology itself has progressed and the needs of students have changed over the years, educational institutions have found themselves in the need to adapt to new technologies and take advantage of them to provide optimal learning experiences.

In the context of language education, following a sociocultural perspective of language learning, the definition of Digital Literacies was that of "the sets of skills and abilities that are necessary to accomplish socially situated reading and writing tasks, drawing on a range of digital tools" (Hafner, 2013, p. 830). To put it in simple words: "the modes of reading, writing and communication made possible by digital media" (Hafner, Chik, & Jones, 2015, p. 1). As it has been stated by many scholars before, up to this day it remains hard to point to uniquely defining characteristics or sets of skills that a digitally literate person should have. Nevertheless, Hafner et al. (2013) provided a list of abilities that are involved in digital literacies. The following are not all the skills, but the ones that resulted most relevant to this synthesis: know how to appropriately comment on other people's online texts, use online platforms as a medium to gain knowledge collaboratively, use a combination of visual, aural, and textual information to create multimodal texts; recreate online content in a creative way, and know how to adequately maintain interactions with other people in different online spaces (p. 813).

Moreover, Hafner et al. (2015) introduced two reasons to include digital literacies practices in the classroom: the first one is that of students' needs. The communicative needs



of the modern student are not the same as those from 30 years ago, and therefore language education must change in order to meet the current student's needs. The second reason is that of context: in the modern world, being in online communities serves as new contexts for students to develop language skills with other learners and native speakers, thus, benefitting from genuine interactions.

However, incorporating technology into the classroom is not just taking a device or an app and integrating it into the curriculum; first, there needs to be a logical foundation to add it; and second, teachers should be familiar with this technology and know how to use it. According to the article by Tour "Digital Mindsets: Teacher's Technology Use in Personal Life and Teaching (2015), "their [Teacher's] everyday digital literacy practices and digital mindsets are not left behind at the classroom door: they are brought into the classroom and influence what happens there" (p. 136). This referred to the assumption about technologies made by teachers and how they can limit the way they incorporate technology into the classroom. It is not bad to see technology as a tool to aid education; however, this mindset is extremely limiting to the development of student's digital literacies. Instead, Tour (2015) suggested that to make progress in the teaching of digital literacies, teachers needed to be given the opportunity to reflect on their assumptions about technology and "to extend their understandings about affordances of ICT [Information and Communications Technology] in creative and innovative ways" (p. 136). Further supporting this suggestion, Knobel & Lankshear (2014) stated that "It is increasingly imperative for teachers themselves to experience and understand what it means to be fully engaged in new literacies practices" (p.100). Knowing how these practices function will make it easier for teachers themselves to recognize and prioritize when trying to adapt and integrate them into the classroom.

As for what needs to be considered with respect to digital literacies and the classroom, Hafner (2013) called on the key elements of the possibilities of learning in online spaces: 1) **Hypertext and multimedia**: new forms of representation; 2) **Collaboration and remix**: users are not as passive consumers as they used to be and now take on both role of consumer and content creator culture; and 3) **authentic online audiences**: users can at any point post their creations and receive feedback or reviews on their post, drawing, video and therefore they can make those same comments in other people's work. Adding to this last element, Knobel & Lankshear (2014) proposed that teachers wanting to add Digital Literacies practices to their lessons should reevaluate assessment and structure learning experiences so that regular feedback, peer feedback, and mentoring become part of the lesson (p. 100). Another

important aspect to consider is that one should be aware of and “learn how language and its use are shaped by digital spaces and the social contexts in which digital practices occur” (Tour, 2019, p. 2). However, these are all just characteristics that need to be taken into consideration and thus, the question how can digital literacies be taught in an L2 context? was brought forward.

One of the possible answers to the previous question can be found in a *situated learning* approach, a framework that has been acknowledged as successful for this objective. In *situated learning* (Gee, 2004), learning takes place within social contexts, be it “embedded or in simulated social contexts” (Hafner, 2013b, p. 657) and students work on their own knowledge. The key factor in this approach is that it presents digital literacies in context, and not as isolated, out-of-context items. It is more meaningful for students when there is a clear relation between the learning context and the real-life context (Duke et al., 2006). Authenticity is what motivates students to find and create meaning and it can be found in: 1) real audience, the product is made with an audience in mind; 2) a true purpose, it serves a real purpose such as sharing information and 3) authentic texts, texts found in everyday life (Duke et al., 2006). It is due to these attributes that a real problem-centered approach is an optimal way to address the teaching of digital literacies in the language classroom; for instance, creating a Youtube account to post videos and writing a review about a book on a website are two problems that require different skills and that have their respective audiences and limitations, therefore, students will have to think about the audience, the website’s limitations, their registry, and the purpose of their writing in order to convey a meaningful message.

### **Out-of-class learning**

Throughout this paper, it has been the intention to highlight the ‘community’ aspect that comes with digital literacies. As stated, before in the various definitions provided by multiple scholars, digital literacies can be defined as “the engagement in digital cultures and practices” (Hafner et al., 2015, p. 2). Nonetheless, so far little has been covered about where learning takes place. To answer this interrogative, a look at the definitions and characteristics of three terms: affinity spaces, CALL, and fan communities needs to be taken.

*Affinity spaces* (Gee, 2004) are spaces where learning happens and are constituted by people who have one or more interests or goals in common and bond over this content through social practices specific to that space. An affinity space can be virtual, physical or a combination of both in which there is an interaction between the members. For obvious



reasons, this study will focus on virtual spaces. Furthermore, one of the defining characteristics of these spaces is that members are not related to each other on a personal level (they are not family members nor belong to the same close community); instead, people are able to bond with each other over the interest or goal in common. Another important characteristic of these spaces is that the distribution of knowledge is not limited to just one member, be it new or experienced. On the contrary, each person joining the space can bring information and share it with others (*intensive* and *extensive* knowledge). Information is not held privately, it is distributed within the space across people, tools, and technologies. Additionally, the information is not permanent in that one space, members often make use of ICT to bring that information 'out' of that space; which is not really out of the space, but rather an extension of it. Lastly, knowledge is not shared via direct instruction. Instead, knowledge is acquired on a daily basis by means of daily practices found in the routines of the participants in the space; without direct instruction, members rely on guided participation from all types of participants, experienced or not, from different cultural, social and economic backgrounds, as well as objects, tools and technologies (Gee, 2004). It is the spread of knowledge and inexistent ranks that allow affinity spaces to impose a great opportunity for English language learners to find comfort in a place where they can both practice the language and work on their communicative and information-handling skills.

In very simple terms, Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) is learning that happens with the aid of a computer or electronic device; initially, the term was used to refer to computer programs specifically designed for education. However, as technology has become more common in everyday life, CALL has been able to evolve from merely formal education to informal. It is the latter type that this paper is interested in. Chik (2013) talked about *Naturalistic* CALL and defined it as “the students' pursuit of some leisure interest through a second or foreign language in digital environments in informal learning contexts, rather than for the explicit purpose of learning the language” (p.835). Therefore, it is learning that happens when the student uses technology to enjoy an interest in the digital world, specifically without the intention of improving their foreign language skills. Addressing the authentic nature of digital literacies, Sauro and Zourou (2019) coined the term *digital wilds*. This term “emphasizes the dynamic, unpredictable, erratic character of technologies, especially those not designed for learning purposes, and warns against a pedagogical use in a way that over controls this wilderness” (p. 2). Most pre-service and experienced teachers may be familiar with the act of adapting material or tools to fit language learning; for instance, assignments such as creating

a post on a social network for a class raise the question of how much of these modifications start to be detrimental to learner's progress.

Online fan communities, from this point onwards, referred to as *Fandoms*, are affinity spaces where fans of certain media gather to interact with each other by creating, remixing and sharing creative media based on the source material through different platforms. Fan practices range all the way from the visual ones such as *Fan-art* and *Fan-animation* to literary ones such as *Fan-theory* and *Fan-fiction*; the latter being one of the most recognised practices outside fandom culture. There have been numerous case studies of the involvement of fandom in the development of the L2; these studies often reported on the fan practices done that resulted in an accidental improvement of the L2. For instance, the popular case of Almon, a high school student who emigrated to the United States from China and improved his English skills through his participation in the J-pop fan community (Lam, 2000 as cited in Thorne & Reinhardt, 2009). It is noticeable how fan practices can contribute to the development of the users' L2 language skills and digital literacies as they are responsible for their own progress and consequently working on their self-efficacy for learning. However, Sauro (2017) highlighted that it is crucial that teachers who wish to integrate fan practices into teaching context are aware of the extent to which involvement and interaction are required for specific fan practices.

The reason fan communities are being selected as the location for learning to happen is for those very same factors of authenticity, motivation, and engagement. It is widely accepted that when students are interested in the content, they will seek out ways to accomplish their learning goals. As Hashim and Yunus (2019) put it: "learners are more independent in fostering their own learning, especially when they are motivated and have interest in the learning process" (p. 7). When seeking to integrate fan practices into the classroom, one should keep in mind that the original purpose is that of leisure and not education. In a direct conversation with Dr. Alaistar Creelman (Appendix 1) about rewards and its perks, he said that small rewards for small steps in a course are a strong motivator; rewarding each phase until completion keeps students engaged since there is a visual representation of their progress (A. Creelman, personal communication, September 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2021).

Although the main topic of discussion was Gamification, which refers to the use of elements of game-playing in another activity, usually in order to make that activity more interesting (Oxford Learner's Dictionaries, n.d.), there is a connection between rewards and motivation in fan practices. In fan communities, Fanfiction writers look forward to comments

or 'reviews' of their work; therefore, it is of the utmost importance to consider frequent and genuine feedback when trying to mix fan practices and language learning.

One of the main issues found in these out-of-classroom online practices is the integration into the curriculum since the use of the L2 is not foreseeable and structured (Godwin-Jones, 2015) and the activities the learners engage in are selected by them and not an institution. Another concern is that of evaluation and assessment, how can teachers evaluate informal learning outside the classroom? There have been a couple of suggestions to both integration and evaluation. The first one involved the use of *Bridging activities* (Thorne & Reinhardt, 2008), activities that support learners' self-efficacy in selecting and analyzing texts of their interest. As for evaluation, Language Learning and Teaching Beyond the Classroom (LBC) was proposed by Benson in 2011. LBC is a framework that provides four parameters to evaluate participation LBC practices: location (out-of-class vs. in-class), formality (informal vs. formal), pedagogy (non-instructed vs. instructed), and locus of control (self-directed vs. other-directed) (Benson, 2011 as cited in Sauro & Zourou, 2019). These parameters help to bring together LBC practices, affinity spaces, and digital literacies to use in the classroom.

## Reflection and conclusion

The English classroom can find itself being benefited from the incorporation of fan community practices, in this case, the engagement in gift exchanges (activity in which students work on a piece of writing or art to gift to another student based on a prompt by said student), and digital literacies in the following aspects:

Students learn how to navigate the digital world: technology has evolved from being a tool to being a necessity for day-to-day transactions. Incorporating digital literacies means providing students with the abilities necessary to find, process, and replicate information efficiently with the addition of learning a foreign language.

Students engage in authentic language exchanges: it is important to address the fact that many of our students experience English on the internet, which is filled with people from around the world, which gives them a chance to interact with both learners of the language and native speakers. In fan communities, creators and consumers have direct interaction with one another about the fan work created, this relationship lends itself to genuine communication and language use.

Improvement in student motivation and relationships: the main interest in this project is to make the learning of these necessary skills feel organic. The project draws on outside-the-

classroom practices and personal interests for learning to happen. It is a well-known fact that when students feel a connection to the learning material, their motivation to complete the course is almost self-sustained. And lastly, these fan practices may increase the chance of students bonding with one another over different interests, creative processes and developing a more personal connection than that of just a classmate.

To conclude, the inclusion of digital literacy into the L2 classroom is imperative in the modern language learning context. However, this is not to say that it does not come without any setbacks; first and foremost, teachers must be aware of its relevancy and be well-versed in the technological resources they wish to implement. This paper has advocated for the use of online fandoms as places for language learning due to its authenticity of interactions, students' engagement and motivation. Nevertheless, how to successfully apply fandom practices in a formal educational context while respecting their nature is yet to be determined; additionally, as product of a reflection on the literature, this paper has suggested the implementation of a gift exchange activity as part of the course in an attempt to use out-of-the-classroom practice and personal interests to learn a second language in an inconspicuous manner.

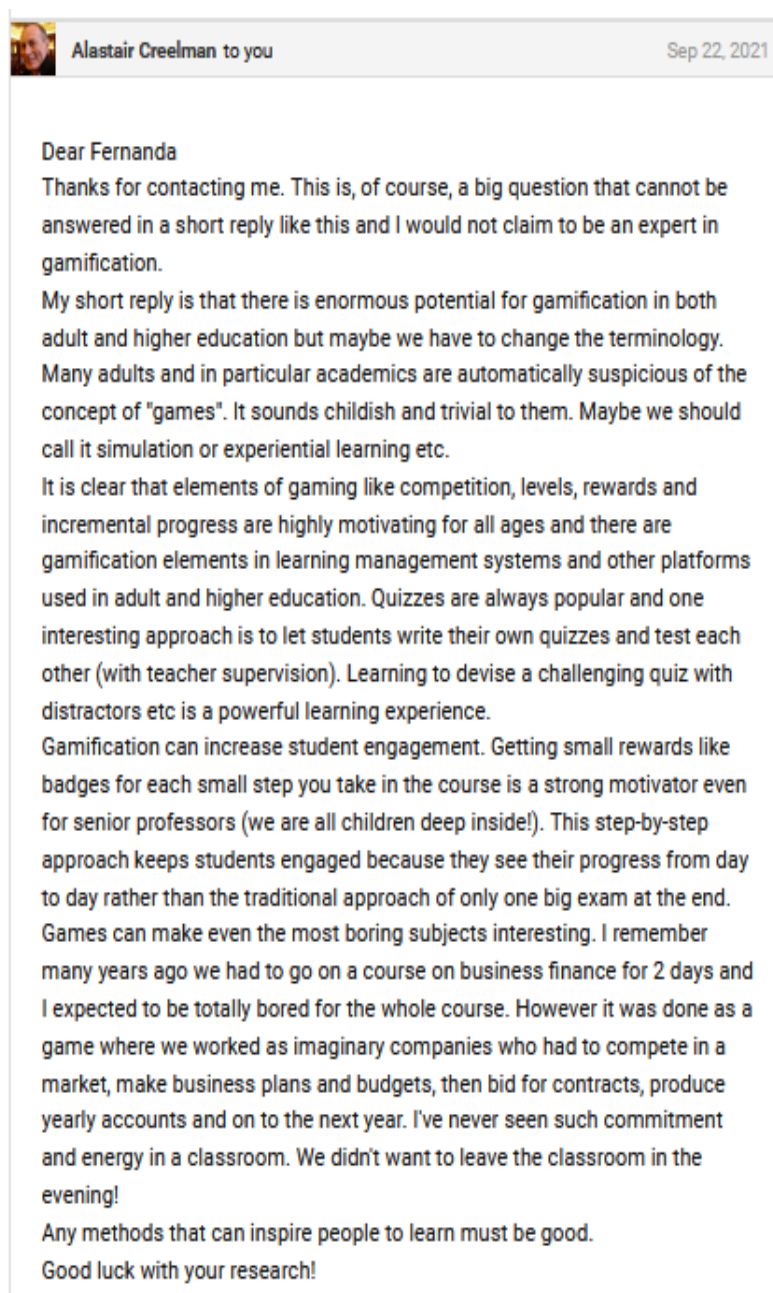
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## Appendix 1

### Personal Communication with Dr. Alastair Creelman



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