Harnessing Writing in the Wild: Practical Applications of Affinity Spaces for English Language Instruction

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Abstract

In this article I aim to explore ways in which affinity spaces (Gee, 2004) can be adapted for English language instruction. Affinity spaces attract participants who enthusiastically share their passions, such as popular culture, video games, or literature. Researchers have found that affinity spaces contribute to improvements in reading (Steinkuehler, Compton-Lilly, & King, 2010) and writing (Black, 2007) literacy of both native English speakers and ELLs. Previous research has explored applications of these spaces in language instruction including incorporating topics from popular culture in courses and engaging students in online writing (Sauro & Sundmark, 2016). Other adaptations used the online content of affinity spaces as materials for language analysis in the classroom (Thorne & Reinhardt, 2008). I break down the characteristics of affinity spaces (Gee & Hayes, 2012) and propose them as a framework aimed to harness the benefits of affinity spaces for English language classroom adaptation. These practical applications include student-selected course activity topics, sharing student writing online, and taking on leadership roles in an online environment.
Introduction

The rich online applications such as blogs, wikipages, or social media have made reaching large audiences effortless. These online platforms have encouraged many aspiring authors to share their ideas. In fact, writers have been so prolific online that research attempts commenced to study these literacy practices (Gee, 2004; Howard, 2014; Thorne & Reinhardt, 2008). The New Literacy Studies (Howard, 2014) look at how people connect online and how, through active participation, they become authors and consumers of content. According to New Literacy Studies, it is the collective intelligence of individuals and their collaboration that shape literacy practices. Scholars argue that online practices are crucial for understanding how language learning happens (Sauro & Zourou, 2019). Harnessing those in-the-wild practices in formal instruction may assist English language learners (ELLs) in developing their academic English skills.

One of the New Literacies concepts helpful in understanding collaborative practices of language learning are *affinity spaces*. Affinity spaces were first introduced by Gee (2004) and are places to which people are drawn by a common practice or passion, otherwise known as the common endeavor. Affinity spaces have been compared to Communities of Practice proposed by Lave and Wenger (1991). Those are learning communities in which skilled practitioners train their apprentices until independent performance of the latter. Despite this similarity in the teaching-learning model, communities of practice require belonging (thus also imply exclusion) while affinity spaces do not bind participants by membership (Gee, 2004). Participation is open to all audiences and the learning is not imposed by the master practitioner. Participants can
come and go at will and do not have to be faithful to one teacher. They can also be a teacher and a learner simultaneously depending on the skills (Gee, 2004).

Affinity spaces serve as a field of studying online literacy practices (Curwood, Magnifico, & Lammers, 2013; Steinkuehler, Compton-Lilly, & King, 2010). A significant portion of this research focuses on language learners showing that ELLs are present and active in online affinity spaces (Thorne, Black, & Sykes, 2009). One of the reasons for this may be that affinity spaces allow ELLs to build identities by providing authentic and meaningful ways to write in the target language (L2) (Burke, 2013; Lam, 2000). Research has also shown that ELLs’ online affinity space writing improves their English composition skills (Black, 2009; Shafirova & Cassany, 2019). Those findings suggest that online affinity spaces should be explored as a possible venue for L2 instruction. That is why in this article, I parse the features of affinity spaces that have been credited with being useful in literacy building. I propose practical adaptations of those features in an English language classroom. The suggestions are adaptable to different contexts (ESL or EFL), ages of students, and intensity of instruction, as long as students have internet connection.

**Features of Affinity Spaces**

Online affinity spaces include any virtual place that draws in participants ready to exchange knowledge or ideas. Each affinity space needs two components: portals and common endeavor. The *portals* (Gee, 2004) are gateways allowing access to the affinity space. Common portals are fanfiction websites, blogs, or discussion boards. One example of a portal is The Sims Writer’s Hangout, a site on which fans of a life-simulation video game, The Sims share their fanfiction based on the game (Curwood et al., 2013). The
second crucial affinity space component is the *common endeavor* (Gee, 2004). It is the passion that captivates participants and may include interests or favorite practices such as literature (Harry Potter series), movies (Star Wars), video games (The Sims), or art (Manga).

Both of those components allow knowledge exchanges between motivated participants. In fact, Gee and Hayes (2012) identified several features of affinity spaces particularly conducive to learning. This article describes six of those features and suggests examples of their adaptation in English language instruction.

**Common Endeavor**

The first feature of affinity spaces which could benefit English instruction is the common endeavor. A common endeavor attracts people with shared passions, thus stimulating the interchanges of knowledge (Gee & Hayes, 2012). As a result of such exchanges, the participants are more likely to teach and learn more about their topic of interest.

A preponderance of the affinity space exchanges take the form of asynchronous writing. The common endeavor provides the motivation for aspiring writers (Curwood et al. 2013) who share their fanfiction (i.e. novels, poems, or short stories inspired by popular and classical literature, movies, or TV shows) on fanfiction websites that welcome such contributions by fans (Black, 2007). In addition, studies of young EFL students found that they preferred to learn the authentic English used in their online affinity spaces to the one in their classes (Hannibal Jensen, 2019).

Affinity spaces already boast some of the most prolific ELL writers. Literature and movies are one of the common endeavors popular with ELLs (Curwood et al. 2013) Online diaspora communities also provide a great common endeavor for ELL fanfiction
and poetry writers (Lam & Rosario-Ramos, 2009; Yi, 2007, 2008 cited in Thorne et al., 2009). For other ELLs, video games are the common endeavor that motivates them to write in English (Lam, 2009; Thorne et al., 2009). This feature of affinity spaces may provide the needed motivation for ELLs who often struggle with academic writing in formal instruction (MacArthur, Philippakos, & Graham, 2016).

There have been a few attempts to use the common endeavor of affinity spaces in language instruction. Researchers working with native English-speaking adolescents have explored using popular literature as a course topic in order to motivate students to read and write (Curwood et al., 2013). In ELL instruction, suggestions from research include designing courses around popular culture and technology (Black, 2009). For example, in one study, Sauro and Sundmark (2016) prompted students to engage in digital collaborative fanfiction writing using popular fan media franchise, The Hobbit.

**Suggested ELL classroom use.** Learning from the research mentioned above, common endeavors could be included in English language instruction. In the wild, people engage with things that interest them the most (Azevedo, 2013). That is what brings them together despite their differences. For ELL students, language used in a classroom may be decontextualized as it is made to fit linguistically and culturally heterogeneous populations (in an ESL situation) and interests (in both ESL and EFL contexts). Affinity spaces allow customization of the classroom language. Instructors may allow students to choose their own reading and writing topics based on individual common endeavors (passions). Following suggestions of Thorne and Reinhardt, instructors could implement *bridging activities* (2008) and guide the learning tasks, while the students take charge of the content choosing texts meaningful to them. For instance, students may write research
papers using sources found in their online affinity spaces. The content can be based on their hobbies, professions, or interest and come from online portals like wikis or discussion boards.

**Low Bias**

The low bias of affinity spaces is another feature that could be explored in ELL instruction. The anonymity of online affinity spaces, may provide an age-, class-, gender-, race-, or ability-blind environment, in contrast to real-life communities where those factors are obvious and often a reason for discrimination (Gee, 2004). Offline, age, for example, can limit participation as traditionally the elders of the community take on leadership roles. In one instance, online affinity spaces allowed a teenage participant to take on a leadership role regardless of his age (Curwood, 2013; Gee & Hayes, 2012). Similarly, an ELL who was denied participation in the dominant discourse offline by being prejudiced against based on her pronunciation was an active writer in her online affinity space (Lam, 2000; Lam, 2009). The asynchronous nature of the online portals she engaged in provided her with time to craft her English writing before posting.

This feature of affinity spaces is worth exploring as an asset in English language classes. The anonymity of online portals allows students to subject their writing to scrutiny, yet to save face in case their writing is marked by L2 phrasing or mistakes. In addition, English language students may refrain from expressing themselves orally in fear of being embarrassed (Lam, 2000; Lam, 2009). Allowing students an online writing space to contribute their opinions may alleviate the anxiety so often present in speaking (Chan, Abdullah, & Yusof, 2012).
Suggested ELL classroom use. Instructors can capitalize on the low bias of affinity spaces. One instructional approach is to request students to write or comment on others’ blogs (Gerich, 2013) in their affinity spaces. Instructors can also encourage students to read and post on discussion fora concerning topics of their interest (Vaz Bauler, 2013). Asynchronous writing online allows students to think through and revise their writing or even request language help from their audience (Burke, 2013). Engaging in writing online may be less stressful if there is no rubric or grading scale. However, to provide accountability for their work, students may be required to demonstrate learning by completing a written or oral report on their online activity. In addition, as an in-class pair or group activity, students could compare their online experiences, share the knowledge, and describe the space in which they engaged in.

Multiple Routes to and Ways of Leadership

Allowing multiple routes to and ways of leadership is the next feature of affinity spaces. The participants may take on leadership roles in different portals (Lammers, Curwood, & Magnifico, 2012). For example, a participant may moderate discussion boards on multiple fansites, create YouTube channels, or administrate a fansite. Additionally, they may switch or invent new roles. In fact, Black (2009) observed that novice ELL writers participating in a fanfiction website became leaders in their affinity space. Over time, they learned how to create and maintain blogs, use discussion fora, and become fluent in other digital literacies. In another study, Lam (2000) found that a teenage immigrant from Hong Kong was able to leverage his passion for J-pop (Japanese pop music and culture) to gain access to the dominant language culture. In school he was in remedial ESL classes and his English proficiency was labeled as deficient. Online,
however, the popular J-pop website in English that he designed and administered provided him with access to English speaking discourse, which he was denied in a classroom. Engaging in pen pal activities with other fans, he was able to practice English and foster a passionate J-pop network. Through their leadership roles in affinity spaces, these ELLs became active members in their L2 community while in real life they were considered outsiders.

**Suggested ELL classroom use.** ELL instruction could profit from the multiple routes to and ways of leadership that affinity spaces offer. Taking on leadership roles and asserting oneself as a contributing member of the L2 community may be difficult for a language learner. Affinity spaces democratize the access to leadership (Gee & Hayes, 2012). A language instructor may assist students in exploring ways of taking on leadership roles in affinity spaces. Showing students how to create a portal (blog, website, or discussion forum) may open a new venue for them to be heard by the native English speakers. A simple activity may include a contest in which each student designs a portal devoted to their passion (hobby, major, or profession). The evaluation criteria may also be democratized by letting students generate the rubric for the contest (Becker, 2016). With instructor’s guidance, students could first collectively decide on criteria for a successful portal (e.g. popularity gauged by the number of site visits or time spent on site) and use them to evaluate and vote on the best portal in class.

**Space Shared by All Expertise Levels**

Affinity spaces also provide the space for all expertise levels; newbies (the novice participants) and masters (experienced participants) can participate side-by-side in the same space, allowing for equal access to knowledge for everybody (Gee & Hayes, 2012).
The newbies engage in legitimate peripheral participation (LPP) through which they slowly get acculturated and apprenticed into the higher levels of expertise by masters (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Initial tasks may be simple, yet meaningful and the newbie may be gradually trusted with more complex tasks. The affinity space portal becomes the venue of those learning-teaching interactions.

The ELLs’ access to expert English language users (native or native-like speakers) is a benefit of affinity spaces. Thorne et al. (2009) reported on ELLs playing the popular Massive Multi-player Online Game (MMOG) World of Warcraft. The game required that players team up and coordinate their efforts using online communication tools to accomplish game goals. The novice players relied on expert players to advance in the game and were coached into the effective strategies of team play. This LPP allowed for newbie-master interactions which resulted in ELLs building language (English in this case) for game play and for social interaction (humor, fraternizing, etc.).

In another study, an ELL joined the affinity space of the MMOG Maple Story using instant messaging tools for communication with other players. She chose the English version, Maple Global, specifically to improve her English literacy (Lam, 2009). Her LPP of engaging with other English language speakers facilitated improvement of her L2 ability. In a similar way, an immigrant from Hong Kong shared his expertise in J-pop on his website and via pen pal letters. He could draw on the expertise of other English speakers to improve his language skills (Lam, 2000).

In addition to being consumers of expert knowledge, in affinity spaces, ELLs have the opportunity to become experts. While they may not see themselves as experts in English, they may have expertise in other fields such as artistic expression (Li, Gromik,
& Edwards, 2013), digital literacies like enhancing photos, creating videos, or modding (modifying game code) (Lee, 2012), or extensive knowledge of Japanese Manga or The Harry Potter series (Black, 2007).

**Suggested ELL classroom use.** Educators may design activities that allow students to share their expertise. One such activity may be creating a step-by-step tutorial. Students would first identify where their strengths lie in technical abilities or content knowledge. Subsequently, individually or in groups (if their strengths overlap), they would create a product through which they share their knowledge. They could identify the best ways to present the skill (e.g. a screenshot tutorial, video game walkthrough, podcast, etc.) and find English speaking portals to share it (fansite, blog, discussion forum, social network, etc.). They could finish the task with a reflective activity (Orem, 2001) such as journaling, presenting, or group discussion.

**Multiple Forms of Participation and Content Contribution**

Affinity spaces do not define or limit where or how one participates nor what content one chooses to contribute. Forms of participation are chosen by the participant (Gee & Hayes, 2012; Lammers et al., 2012). The intensity of participation may also vary from passive consumption – just *lurking*, or looking around – to active production – *geeking out*, or activity characterized by “intense commitment or engagement with media or technology.” (Horst, Herr-Stephenson, & Robinson, 2010, p. 65). Therefore, one might join a discussion, administer a webpage, or watch a YouTube game walkthrough. The form of the shared content may range from writing and sharing fanfiction to posting a self-made video or an art project (Lammers et al., 2012).
This benefit of affinity spaces is often taken advantage of by diaspora communities. For example, immigrant adolescents living in the U.S. shared their fiction and poetry using both English and native languages (Lam & Rosario-Ramos, 2009; Yi, 2008 cited in Thorne et al., 2009). The multi-language literacy, or multiliteracy, practices served different roles; native language activity helped maintain the heritage language, while English practices assisted in developing the new language. Similarly, fandoms encourage participants to share their varied creative works. ELLs have been shown to share their poetry in English as well as art based on their passions, such as Manga (Burke, 2013).

**Suggested ELL classroom use.** This feature of affinity spaces can also be adapted for English instruction. Affinity spaces have potential to allow meaningful L2 discourse participation of students at lower levels of English proficiency. Each student may be instructed to find and watch a YouTube or TED Talk video about their passion. Subsequently, they could write or present a report on what they learned from it. The creative students who are bound by limited language skills, could meaningfully participate by sharing their own pieces of art like drawings, musical performances, or animations. In class, they could select each other’s creative contributions, or those posted by other participants of their affinity spaces and use them as inspiration for a descriptive paragraph, a theme of a narrative story, or an art contest activity (Berhó & Defferding, 2005).

As students’ English proficiency improves, they may start writing and posting their fanfiction (Sauro & Sundmark, 2016). A writing teacher may also guide students through an academic writing process using students’ affinity spaces. For example, an
instructor could scaffold comparison/contrast essay but allow for the student to compare
two characters in their favorite novel much like in a typical extensive reading activity
(Mermelstein, 2015), and post them on their blog inviting comments. Alternatively,
students could write a report on two popular video games highlighting advantages and
disadvantages of each and post it to a gamewiki as a guide to help other players in their
game choices.

**Passionate Audiences**

Affinity spaces depend on socializing (Lammers et al., 2012). They encompass an
array of social networking sites and social media (Gee & Hayes, 2012). Through those
avenues, authors get access to public audiences (Lammers et al., 2012). If an affinity
space participant is a writer and seeks feedback on their piece of work, a passionate
reviewer may provide helpful criticism. In this case, technology facilitates this type of a
writing workshop allowing the input of passionate audiences (Magnifico, 2010). The
interaction with audience gives the author certain responsibility and motivates them to
revise and improve (Magnifico, 2010). Thus, affinity spaces democratize the process of
writing as the author does not depend on a teacher or an editor to revise their work.

One example of how ELLs are using this benefit of affinity spaces is through
*beta-reading*. Beta-reading is a process of reading “a work of fiction with a critical eye,
with the aim of improving grammar, spelling, characterization, and general style of a
story prior to its release to the general public” (Fanfiction.net, 2008, n.p. cited in Black,
2009, p. 691). Fandoms boast a very passionate audience on which ELL writers can rely.
In her study, Black (2009) found that because of this reciprocal process, ELLs became
highly motivated and developed their English reading and writing literacy. In a study of
diaspora-based affinity spaces, the passionate audience allowed writers to seek and receive feedback. Those ELLs engaged in relay writing (Yi, 2008 cited in Thorne et al., 2009) where multiple authors took turns writing a story. In yet another case, an adolescent immigrant living in Canada requested and received feedback from her online community about her poetry written in English (Burke, 2013).

**Suggested ELL classroom use.** The audience of affinity spaces can serve as an augmentation of an English writing class. Academic writing is a drafting process that requires review and revisions (Graham & Sandmel, 2011). This feedback, which for decades has been facilitated in class by the teacher and the peer-review process (Mendonça & Johnson, 1994), could be enhanced through affinity space use. For instance, students could be prompted to write short fanfiction based on their favorite movies, books, or games (Sauro & Sundmark, 2016). The instructor might review the existing fanfiction as models first (Kell, 2009; Sauro, 2017). To help students participate respectfully of the publishing and critiquing rules of the fan community, it would be beneficial to introduce students to the culture and expectations of the fanfiction website (Sauro, 2017). After in-class practice on drafting and constructive feedback, students could post their writing in their affinity space portals to receive feedback (DiGiovanni & Nagawami, 2001) before submitting the paper to their teacher. Students might write reports on types of feedback they received, its utility, and perceived drawbacks and advantages. This way they could make a use of their affinity space as a proofreading audience. However, because of the unpredictable nature of wild online spaces, such as quality of feedback, kindness of reviewers, or time it takes, instructors may prepare students for those constraints and showcase a few examples of such feedback.
These classroom adaptations are but a few of the ways in which affinity spaces can enhance English language instruction. The table below briefly summarizes the above and suggests a few other practical applications of affinity spaces.

**Table 1**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Affinity Space features</th>
<th>Classroom adaptations</th>
<th>Examples or assignments</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Common Endeavor</strong></td>
<td>ELLs are allowed to choose their own topics based on hobby, interest, major, or occupation</td>
<td>• writing an essay on a topic of interest</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• talking/writing about a self-selected text</td>
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<td>• presenting on a self-selected news podcast</td>
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<td><strong>Low Bias</strong></td>
<td>ELLs can confidently contribute to affinity space online</td>
<td>• writing a fan blog</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• participating in an online discussion</td>
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<td>• writing or presenting a reflection on online activity experience</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• class discussion comparing students’ individual experiences</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Multiple Routes to and Ways of Leaderships</strong></td>
<td>ELLs create affinity space portal</td>
<td>• contest on best student-created website with a student-created rubric</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Space Shared by All Expertise Levels</strong></td>
<td>ELLs share their expertise</td>
<td>• posting a YouTube video game walkthrough and presenting it to the class</td>
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<td>• posting a screenshot/screencast tutorial on how to enhance a photo in Photoshop and writing a reflection on the process</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• recording and posting a video of making a national dish and discussing the project in groups in class</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Multiple Forms of Participation and Content Contribution</strong></td>
<td>ELLs can consume and contribute to affinity spaces online at all English skill levels</td>
<td>• Complete a comprehension/note-taking task after watching a TED Talk</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>• Sharing a posted video of playing an instrument and answering classmates’ questions about their music</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Posting a piece of their original art as an inspiration for writing or as an object to be described by their classmates</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Passionate Audience  ELLs can share their writing online  • Posting an essay, fiction, or poem written for a course on a fansite requesting audience feedback and revising it accordingly

**Conclusion**

The features of affinity spaces that have been recognized by researchers as helpful in developing literacy can be harnessed to augment English language instruction. Nevertheless, caution needs to be exercised when adapting affinity spaces for classroom use. Instructors need to consider the learners’ language skills, technological ability, and access to technology (Sauro, 2014). What is more, the studies above show that if anything, there is a variety of affinity spaces that motivated each of those unique study participants in distinct ways. Therefore, when thinking of English language classroom adaptations, we need to consider the individuality of each student and design affinity space use that could accommodate the differences. Affinity spaces are practices that happen in the wild and are spontaneous. Their domestication for classroom use has to be carefully crafted as to not corrupt the advantages of those spaces. That is why the suggestions above focus only on the aspects of affinity spaces that could augment ELLs’ classroom experiences.

Research shows that learners enthusiastically engage in literacy practices in affinity spaces. More importantly, the intensity of that participation is high as it is fueled by their passion. ELLs find themselves in classrooms divided by skills and forced to study general topics chosen by the instructor to cater to various interest and majors of their students. Educators should investigate venues to tap into students’ passions to enhance English language instruction. Affinity spaces can be one of those venues.
The list of affinity space English language classroom tasks I proposed is not exhaustive and is meant to serve as an inspiration. Although I focused on writing, these suggestions could be adapted to enhance other L2 skills. These practical adaptations could also serve as a field of research to gauge the usefulness of these spaces for ELLs. Research could be designed to measure the effects of these online practices on ELL writing performance. Researchers could also focus on other effects of these classroom variations of affinity space use to measure effects on student engagement, satisfaction, and confidence. Even though there has been more than a decade effort placed on studying affinity spaces, much needs to be learned in the field of language learning and practical classrooms applications.

About the author

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