

LEARNING THE ROPES: Connected Learning in a WWE Fan Community

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CONNECTED LEARNING
WORKING PAPERS

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INTRODUCTION

People normally say I'm a good, active member, I'm there almost every day and rarely get into arguments. I get some feedback from other members concerning my work, yes, normally good, and I tell members when they're doing well or not so much. I have fun discussing news and aspects of the WWE with other people, I learn new things about the WWE, I meet new people, it's a good return. — Leo

Leo, a 16-year-old from South America, is an active member of the professional wrestling fan community the *Wrestling Boards*, which mainly discusses World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE). Leo, like many members of the *Wrestling Boards*, found that he had no local community that shared his interest in professional wrestling, so he went online to find one. The *Wrestling Boards* offers its participants a space to hang out while discussing wrestling, and also a space to learn and develop skills and interests tangential to or through their interest in wrestling. Leo uses the *Wrestling Boards* as a place to discuss and stay up-to-date with wrestling news, meet people who share his interests, and practice English, which is a second language for him. Here, through the support of peers, he is able to leverage his interest to support academic skill development in an instance of connected learning.

Leo's engagement with the *Wrestling Boards* illustrates how professional wrestling fans can cultivate connected learning—learning that is socially embedded, interest-driven, and tied to civic, academic, or career opportunity (Ito et al. 2013). Often young people's institutional learning is disconnected from their interests and their peer engagements. Interest-powered and peer-supported spaces such as the *Wrestling Boards* offer shared practices, culture, and identity, which can not only foster engagement but also provide settings for civic participation as well as peer-based learning through feedback. The connected learning model suggests that learning that links interests, peer engagement, and academic subjects is meaningful, engaging, and resilient for youth. Leveraging this model for youth who are not already well connected to educational opportunity means tapping into interest areas that may not, at first blush, seem the most academically relevant.

I chose the *Wrestling Boards* community for this case study of a connected learning environment because it provides a window into a highly participatory and connected fandom that differs from stereotypically geeky or tech-centered scenes, as seen with groups such as gamers and coders. As detailed below, the WWE fandom includes a large population of nondominant youth, as well as a content world that is not commonly associated with academics. Educators and researchers' interests in the productive dimensions of wrestling fandom are not completely absent; however, it is still a relatively underappreciated interest area.


I observed the *Wrestling Boards* forums for eight months, October 2012 to May 2013, and interviewed 25 community members. During the observation period, I visited the website several times a week and recorded community member interactions. The in situ

forum interactions are best understood within the context of the forum posts themselves and were thus noted through field notes, as opposed to coding the forum posts directly. Community members frequently included links to outside resources, videos, and audio files. The field notes include quotes or excerpts from dialogue on the website that occurred on the day of observation. While I include excerpts from these notes in this report, they have been modified to protect community members' anonymity while maintaining the essence of the excerpt. The name of the community and all participant names are pseudonyms.

Crayo, the cofounder and administrator of the site, solicited interviews for me through an open call. This garnered about half of the total interviews. Many of these participants were casual users. People who were active on the site or held certain administrative roles were specifically asked to participate in interviews. Interviewees varied by age, ranging from 16 to early 30s; race-ethnicity (15 white, 3 Asian, 2 Native American, 2 African American, 1 Latino, 1 unknown); gender (24 males and 1 female); and geography (North America, South America, Europe, and Asia), as demonstrated by responses from the background survey. Interview questions were informed by observations in the forum. The interviews were semistructured, allowing me to probe for emergent themes.

In this report, I first provide history and background on professional wrestling, WWE, and the fantasy *Wrestling Boards* that are the focus of this study, and then I turn to an analysis of WWE fan activity in relation to the six characteristics of connected learning: peer-supported, interest-powered, academically oriented, production-centered, shared purpose, and openly networked. In the final section of this report, I analyze ways in which the case enriches and challenges our understanding of connected learning by reflecting on how the community maintains standards as well as positive learning supports.

A HISTORY OF PROFESSIONAL WRESTLING



Professional wrestling traces its roots to the nineteenth century (Scientific American 1895) and has thrived as a major pastime in North America for the past four decades, and in Japan for the last three decades, with the WWE now being the largest professional wrestling promotion group in the world. Professional wrestling, with its focus on dramatic performance, differs markedly from the more spartan sport of amateur wrestling seen in the Olympics and in collegiate settings. Professional wrestling continues to carry a cultural stigma of being decidedly lowbrow, much like video games (Sammond 2005). Outsiders often object to the vulgar nature of both and often see them as educational wastelands devoid of cultural value. But just like the varied genres of video game entertainment, professional wrestling offers participants a variety of educational and culturally relevant experiences.

Professional wrestling is, for many people, an enigma. It is a hybrid: part athleticism, part theater, all rolled into sports entertainment. The evolution of professional wrestling to its current state is not well known. Ball (1990) describes the difference between amateur and professional wrestling:

That branch generally referred to as “amateur wrestling” provides a forum where, true to tradition, competing schools are represented by individuals who symbolize the positive characteristics of strength, skill, strategy, and adherence to the rules which the school claims to own. The second form is the relatively new phenomena of “professional wrestling.” Because the opponents have no explicit ties to schools, countries, or other significant groups, wrestlers are free to take on identities of persons or groups both within and outside their immediate society. The identities assumed by wrestlers and the alliance formed by them offer a rare opportunity to observe, on the one hand, the nature of stereotypes held by the organizers, the wrestlers, and the public, and on the other, the interests of the public revealed in the need for explicit stereotypes. (Pp. 3–4)

Because of the slow pace of amateur-style wrestling, professional wrestlers have been working off scripted routines since the 1930s (Ball 1990). Fans did not like the slow pace of wrestling but were upset when they found out that professional wrestling was scripted to increase the pacing and excitement. Even so, they enjoyed the faster pace more than that of the more traditional form of the sport. Wrestling was one of the original broadcast sports because of its format of bouts, which worked well for television advertising, but it fell out of favor with television executives. As wrestling progressed through the decades and reemerged on television in the 1980s, with the spread of cable television access, it began to more heavily incorporate melodramatic elements.

Through a comparison to soap operas, Jenkins (2005) refers to professional wrestling as masculine melodrama. Ball (1990) states that the competitive elements are secondary to the drama before and after the match, although from interviews I have conducted it seems that the two (drama and athleticism) are of equal importance to fans when choosing wrestlers to support. Mazer’s (2005) view of professional wrestling differs slightly

from the views of Ball (1990) and Jenkins (2005), creating a more nuanced approach to the idea of wrestling as melodrama:

Professional wrestling is at once like life and like a lot of other things, theater and academia included: real and fake, spontaneous and rehearsed, genuinely felt and staged for effect, prodigious and reductive, profoundly transgressive and essentially conservative. ... Like Barthes, I frequently find the ecstasy of wrestling's rhetorical and metamorphic possibilities irresistible. Unlike Barthes, however, I have come to believe that what professional wrestling is most like is professional wrestling. (P. 84)

Professional wrestling is in a category all its own. It has only a loose rule system, which is often violated with little penalty, with the most important aspects of the performance being the story line. Capturing the fans' attention trumps the rules.

Wrestlers are conscientious showmen who often allow the audience to pick the "hero" and the "villain" after the show begins. They engage in preliminary cuffing and hair-pulling while they "feel out the house" to see what happy ending is desired. One prominent promoter explained last week: "You never know beforehand when you're gonna see a lousy prizefight. In wrestling, we give you guaranteed entertainment." (Time 1948:51–52; emphasis in the original)

Wrestling fans appreciate the nuances of the entertainment they watch. According to Mazer (2005):

To know the rules by which the game of wrestling is played, not just the names of the moves, but the way the wrestling event is constructed by promoters, is to know how the game of life is played. Whether in the arena or in magazines and on the Internet, fans love to display their expertise. They are "smarts," not "marks." (P. 75)

They display this knowledge through the many means of communication available, including social media (e.g., Facebook and Twitter), YouTube and Tout videos, forums, and wikis. Wrestlers use Twitter and Facebook to update their fans between matches, posting as their wrestling personas. More engaged participants in this fan community take part in one of the many fantasy role-playing games that are available to fans worldwide.

These communication methods are also used to find peer groups who share WWE interests that, for adults especially, are not always readily available in their local communities. This multifaceted, multinational set of resources and social media is called the Internet wrestling community (IWC). The *Wrestling Boards* includes a variety of subforums that allow WWE fans to critically discuss a multitude of topics. For example, there are indi-

vidual boards for specific WWE shows (e.g., RAW and SmackDown), boards for general WWE discussions, boards for other sports discussions and for off-topic discussions, along with a board for the community's fantasy wrestling federation, *Over the Ropes*. Unlike other fantasy sports, fantasy wrestling is not played using real professional wrestlers; instead, it is a text-based role-playing game (RPG) in which players create their own characters, including wrestlers, managers, commentators, and so forth, and participate in matches against each other as they work their way up to championship matches. Fantasy wrestling combines reality and fantasy—combining the reality of wrestling moves and the creativity of fanfiction based on the wrestling canon, just as professional wrestling combines real-life athleticism with the fantasy of dramatic characters and scripted action.

In fantasy wrestling, players develop their own characters, deciding on their looks, their signature moves, whether they are heels, faces, or tweeners (i.e., bad, good, or neutral/ambiguous, respectively), their backstories, and so on. Sometimes the communities make wrestling promotion cards for their players. Each fantasy wrestling group has its own rules. The rules are decided either by the person running the group, who is known as the booker, or by consensus from the group. Players need to understand the intricacies and nuances of wrestling in a sophisticated way and this requires knowing more than simply the names of the moves (Mazer 2005). They have to know the discourse of wrestling and be able to create and maintain a persona that is congruous with the type of wrestler they described on their wrestling card. Players also have to be able to switch between personas fluidly while playing, interacting both as themselves and their characters.

WWE has by far the largest fan base of any professional wrestling promotion with multiple weekly television shows and a number of pay-per-view events annually. WWE programs reach nearly 15 million viewers in the United States alone every week. Among WWE viewers, 19 percent are under the age of 18, 23 percent are 18–34, 21 percent are 35–49, and 37 percent are 50 or older (WWE, N.d.). In an average week, about 35 percent of viewers are female. RAW, the flagship show for the WWE, is the most-watched regularly scheduled program on prime time among Hispanic and African American viewers (WWE, N.d.). These numbers indicate the diversity of the fan community that watches wrestling from week to week.

As mentioned, the fan community of professional wrestling is active and tech savvy. The WWE alone has more than 220 million members on its social media network, with local-language websites in 23 countries (WWE, N.d.). Fans of professional wrestling have set up a vast number of news sites, forums, YouTube channels, and wikis to keep each other up-to-date on the goings-on of professional wrestling and to discuss what fans in the know refer to as “the product.”

Active fans in the WWE fandom engage in a wide range of media content and social communication, developing new relationships, producing media, and contributing to shared endeavors. Through this engagement, they pick up knowledge specific to wrestling, as well as technical, collaborative, writing, and editing skills. When these activities and skills become relevant in their lives outside of the fandom, fans can experience connected learning that is deeply tied to their passionate fan interests. Although professional wrestling is not conventionally considered an academically relevant subject, I found that the community and activities of engaged fans do in fact support learning that can connect to school, civics, and career-relevant pursuits. What follows is a close look at fan practices in relation to the principles of connected learning; in this examination I describe the characteristics of the fandom that can support these positive learning outcomes.

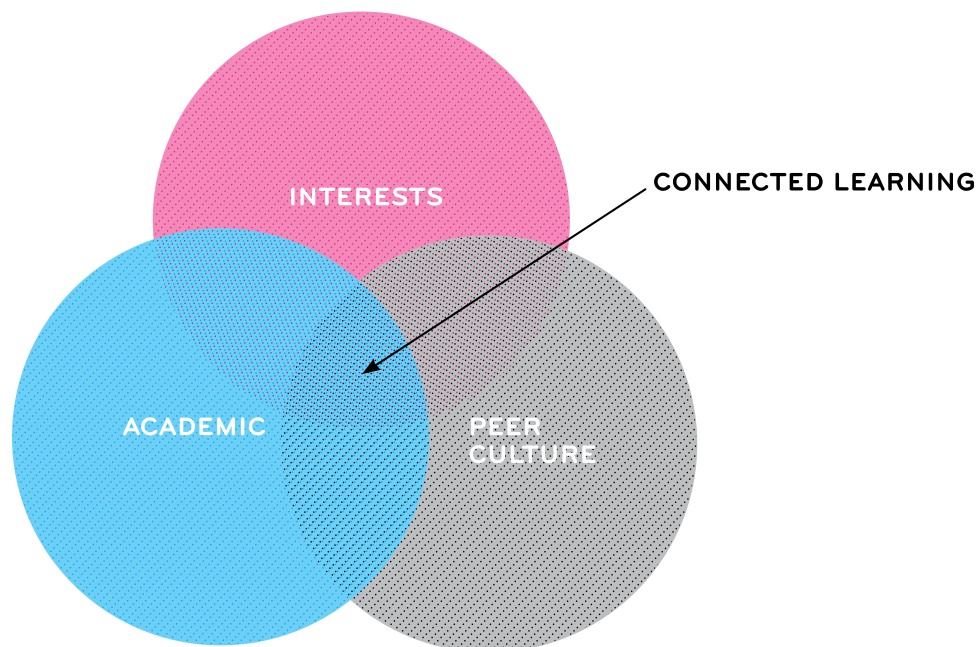


Figure 1
Connecting the Spheres
of Learning, from Ito et al.
2013

INTEREST-POWERED

Learning that grows out of a personal interest is both motivating and meaningful. Further, when situated within a shared group with high standards and metrics for knowledge and expertise, this interest-driven learning is tied to higher-order and resilient learning outcomes. Online communities can provide these kinds of learning contexts, particularly in the case of interests that are not well supported within local or peer school environments. Previous research on video game players and various fandoms has documented similar dynamics (Ito et al. 2013; Jenkins 2006; Martin 2013; Steinkuehler and Duncan 2009). The *Wrestling Boards*, and what fans call the broader Internet wrestling community (IWC), represent other examples of an interest-centered online community that supports learning and expertise. Options for participation and access to information are vast within the IWC, varying from aggregated news sites, to wikis, to social media, to forums, to fantasy wrestling federations. Forums function as

small communities inside the larger expanse of the IWC. These smaller communities create close-knit groups and, as is the case for many members of the *Wrestling Boards*, this connected community fills the void created by the lack of a local community that shares their interest.

Many interviewees stated that they sought out the *Wrestling Boards* in hopes of finding peers who shared their interest. They use the forum for support, exploration, and a place to hang out with friends and peers. Jonathan, a 16-year-old from the UK who describes the prospect of finding local wrestling fans as “bleak,” emphasizes, “The only time I really talk to anyone about WWE is on *Wrestling Boards*.” For many individuals, the forum offers connections to a set of peers who share their interest. Leo, as mentioned earlier, described his involvement with the community as a place to discuss WWE news, learn about WWE, and meet new people. Zach, a 17-year-old from the EU, describes the role the *Wrestling Boards* fills for him. “It’s like having that one friend who you can always relate to. Instead of a friend I have a whole forum to talk to about it.” For these and many other members of the community, having peers who share their interest is a great benefit and helps them overcome the social stigma cast upon them by nonfans.

Discussing wrestling topics, WWE story lines, and plot twists—what many on the *Wrestling Boards* call the “WWE product”—was a reason they began participating, but the atmosphere of the community was what made them stay. Jose, an 18-year-old from the EU, described his participation as a way to be more immersed in his interest: “For someone who doesn’t know wrestling fans in real life it is an easy and fun way to talk WWE and just have fun on the forum. The people were great from the beginning and were very open.” Crayo, the *Wrestling Boards* creator and top administrator, is a 19-year-old from the UK:

To discuss anything WWE I use my forum (*Wrestling Boards*), to find out news from ‘dirt sheets’ for anything else, I use Twitter. I then post the news on my forum and discuss it with the members. It’s helped me really as it’s a place to discuss it, as none of my friends in real life enjoy wrestling. Also, you can read ideas that you would never have thought of and discuss them, and read about the backstage news and future wrestling news. It’s just a great place to discuss professional wrestling in general.

Participants use the *Wrestling Boards* as their main information source for news and updates about the WWE. They also use the forums as a place to share and discuss their thoughts about the current product, theorizing about where story lines will go next.

Storytelling is an important part of WWE, as well as critical to the success of the *Over the Ropes* fantasy wrestling federation on the *Wrestling Boards*. Umang, a 21-year-old from India, ties storytelling very closely to his enjoyment of wrestling.

But mainly, i don't watch WWE for the wrestling itself, but for the storyline and emotions. When i was kid it was just a matter of supporting the good guy and wanting him to win. Now i love it for the storyline, the emotions, the build up, its all edge of the sit stuff.

Because professional wrestling is scripted, compelling storytelling is an essential component of the shows. In *Over the Ropes*, the community collaborates in storytelling to create the universe and feuds between characters. The interest in storytelling and narrative of professional wrestling bring participants together and participation in the fantasy wrestling federation leads to a deeper level, or intensification, of participation. This intensification is tied to love of content and searching for more involvement in the content of WWE. The participants of the *Wrestling Boards* originally tried the forum because they were looking for people who shared their interest in wrestling. They stayed because of the fun and welcoming community that supported deep exploration of wrestling, critical analysis of the product, and hypothesizing about future directions.

PEER-SUPPORTED

Connected learning environments grow from the social support of peer and friendship networks centered on shared purpose, projects, and interests. When young people are engaged with peers in these shared contexts, they learn fluidly from each other by giving and receiving feedback and sharing knowledge in timely and task-specific ways. Seeking recognition and validation by peers also provides social motivation for acquiring skills and expertise. The peer group shares vast resources, such as outside news reports, spoilers, speculations, information, and clips from the shows, to enhance their experience together as well to educate each other.

Crayo started the *Wrestling Boards* with a friend to offer a place for professional wrestling fans to come together and discuss the topic. The site has a fun and energetic feel, welcoming new members and encouraging them to participate at any level. Zach describes the atmosphere of the community this way: "Well as you know I'm a member of *Wrestling Boards*. It's nice to be on the forums because everyone loves WWE and likes to discuss it."

The *Wrestling Boards* has a subforum to welcome newcomers called "The Ramp," which invites them with the tagline: "The music has hit. The spotlight is on you. The crowd is cheering. Make your impact here and tell us who you are!" Two threads are stickied—that is, marked so that they stay at the top of the list of threads on the forum—in this subforum: One asks new members to state how they found the site, and the other gives a template that participants can use to introduce themselves. Crayo created the template as a way to lower the bar to initial participation. He added a note to the template that says, "Just in-case you're stuck on what to say on your big introduction to *Wrestling Boards*, I've come up with a template. It's just something to give you a helping hand if needed."

Introduction posts usually get between 10 and 30 replies and between 75 and 250 views. These responses are always encouraging and friendly, offering help to newcomers.

For many participants, the *Wrestling Boards* community provides not only a safe place to share their enthusiasm for professional wrestling, but it also provides an opportunity to improve their own and other members' knowledge through sharing and circulating information and resources. Crayo is a very active participant on the board, discussing the shows in real time:

I watch them [WWE shows] live on TV. I watch RAW, NXT, Main Event and the Pay-Per-Views, the other shows (SmackDown, Superstars) don't appeal to me at all, they are the definition of stale. I watch them with our community, whilst I have it on the TV I'm discussing it live in the weekly RAW discussion thread.

As the administrator and cofounder of the community, Crayo says he pays attention "to it all" on the forum, frequently sharing resources. Jose said this about the benefits of the forum in terms of getting information:

It is a great way to discuss and talk about the WWE product. As a member of *Wrestling Boards* myself I really could recommend wrestling fans to join a forum if they are interested. It gives you news updates, it helps you understand the full 'WWE Product', getting info about wrestlers, their backgrounds, etc.

The community norms are rooted in educating new members. Crayo explained that the community uses the term "mark," which is someone who does not recognize that wrestling is choreographed. Part of the goal of the community is to educate new members who are marks and turn them into what he calls "smarks," or those who are smart and educated about professional wrestling. Part of this education comes through the process of feedback, help, and compliments shared between members.

Offering feedback and help was a common theme among participants on the *Wrestling Boards*. Jonathan describes how he interacts with his peers on the forum. "I give and get feedback often about what I do. I often help/mentor new members of the forum to the best of my ability. At the end of the day, we're all alike and we're like a family on *Wrestling Boards*." Cloud, a 28-year-old from the UK, felt much the same: "We all try and help each other on here it's a friendly community and we constantly give feedback and advice to each other and I know a lot of us give feedback and advice to Crayo about the site and things we would like to see." Hank, a 17-year-old from the UK and another administrator, has been a member of the site since the beginning. His ID number on the site is 4, which means he was the fourth person to register an account. He describes his work on the site as mostly support.

I mainly help out behind the scenes with a small update or a change here and there. Crayo follows wrestling much more than I do so he does much more of the posting on the site. I try and help people when they get stuck or when they have a suggestion. Some suggestion I try to implement.

Feedback and help, which are at the core of the peer-supported nature of this community, is also apparent in the community's fantasy wrestling federation *Over the Ropes*. Zach, who participates in the fantasy wrestling federation, describes his feedback for the writers as such, "I really look into *Over the Ropes* and try to help them improve it by writing reviews of their work so they can improve." Members of the community who participated in *Over the Ropes* are asked at the end of each week to rate the matches and give feedback. Here is an example of feedback left by Zach for the matches:

3. Yet another well written match. Loved, loved, loved the mosquito reference. I like how Heavy Jones just came off as an absolute monster in this match. Not sure if I like how he pretty much dominated the whole match, I would like to have seen all 3 wrestlers have a moment in the match where they were dominating. By the way, this line made me cringe: 'Sid: Oh-Oh, Clash's head, he has definitely losted a few IQ points after that' Losted. Losted. Losted. Losted. *facepalm* It's okay though, every match had some errors. This one had a lot though. For the last quarter of the match all the commentary said: Standard Commentary and there was only one person commentating. You have to start reading the whole thing before you post it. Still a great match though.

Rating: 7/10

4. I'm not sure how I feel about this Canadian nationalist gimmick; I could see it getting old quickly. We'll see after next week. Alexander Mean really surprised me in this match. Very entertaining and I enjoyed the back and forth offense. I was surprised when the match got restarted. I really liked Alexander Mean's moveset however. I'm curious to find out the identity of the owner is. Maybe he'll be a big personality on the show in future times. Not a lot of stuff I can complain about in this match but in my opinion it wasn't spectacular.

Rating: 9/10

The critical tone of the feedback is important. Zach points out specific instances and makes suggestions for future productions. The responses from the solicited feedback are incorporated into future weeks, so the feedback feeds into and supports the production that takes place within *Over the Ropes*. These forms of formal feedback and ongoing peer sharing create an environment in which participants are constantly striving to improve their writing with the support of the broader community.

ACADEMICALLY ORIENTED

Learners excel and strive to reach their potential when they can pursue their interests. Traditionally, academic spaces offer youth fewer opportunities to explore their interests. Connected learning emphasizes the importance of connecting interests to opportunity and recognition outside of the fandom. Although wrestling carries the social stigma of being lowbrow, the members of the *Wrestling Boards* participate in a variety of academically and life-relevant skills, from digital media skills such as graphic design, to 21st Century skills (Partnership for 21st Century Skills 2009) such as communication and information skills, to traditional academic skills such as writing. Writing is, of course, essential to participation in the forum. Those who participate in *Over the Ropes* are encouraged to write long posts and are helped by other members to develop their ability to role-play and write creatively. Players are rewarded for quality posts of length and composure. The constant feedback and mentoring by others enable players to hone and develop their writing skills.

The same is true for the *Over the Ropes* writers. Writers in the fantasy wrestling federation take the feuds created by the players and weave them into a narrative that describes what actually happens in each match: from the music playing when the wrestler hits the ramp to the moment the referee declares a winner. Mike, an 18-year-old from Michigan, has been a writer since the beginning of the fantasy wrestling federation.

To be honest, creative writing has always been something I have been fond of for awhile now. I was very good at it in high school so my teachers say. When the Federation was thought of, I knew right then I wanted to be a part of it. Since the federation needed writers, getting into it was just as simple as submitting a creative simulated match segment, or a backstory of a character you wanted to be featured in the show. Now that it has grown so much more; to become a writer, you must have been a member on the forum for at least 2 months, and have high quality posts and good grammar. You still also submit a creative writing piece.

Mike takes a lot of pride in being one of the original writers for *Over the Ropes*. “As far as learning things that have helped me outside of the community ... writing for the federation for a long time has definitely greatly increased my creativity, as well as my grammar.” This supports Mike’s long-term goal of taking creative writing as a minor in college and planning to write at least one major creative work in his lifetime.

Many of the participants are bilingual and use the forum to practice their English as well as discuss wrestling. Leo, for example, said, “It helps me practice English as it’s not my native language, it’s been good in that aspect.” The improvement comes from the feedback and mentoring given by other members of the community, as well as from being immersed in an English-language environment.

Participation in *Over the Ropes* has also supported the development of career-relevant

digital media skills. Zach has a high level of skill with Photoshop and uses his skills to help others. He is still in high school but is hoping to study graphic design or drafting/architecture, so practicing his skills in this interest-powered space strengthens his academic pursuits. Crayo has also developed digital media skills through his participation in the site.

It's helped me vastly with online experience and being a webmaster. It's helped me deal with mass amounts of people and has helped me communicate online much easier. My participation in *Wrestling Boards* has hopefully made the site the best it can be at this time, but I always look to improve it.

The same thing is true for Hank, who is one of the administrators who implements changes to the back end of the website. "I'm currently studying computer networking. I'd love to go into the computer sector and get a job hopefully as a systems administrator or something along those lines." He is using skills related to his chosen career path to enhance his enjoyment of his interest.

Many of the participants mentioned the communications skills they developed from participating in the *Wrestling Boards*. These included dealing with arguments, respecting other people's opinions, and negotiation. Lucky, a 19-year-old from the UK and a very active member on the boards, summed it up like this:

I enjoy discussing WWE with different fans around the world. From England to America to Asia and many more. I enjoy hearing different peoples points of view with regards to the product. I believe its helped me realise and respect other peoples opinions, I believe it's influenced me to give different wrestling superstars a chance, and I think it's made me become more helpful as a person due to giving advice and help to newer users.

These skills are especially important to the functioning of the site itself as well as being important to the members in professional and academic settings. The opportunities for academic skill development are based on the production-centered nature that supports participation.

PRODUCTION-CENTERED

Digital tools and environments offer youth myriad opportunities for production by creating media, knowledge, and cultural production in iterative and interactive ways. The hands-on nature of production-centered communities draws on creative traditions of learning through doing. Connected learning environments provide opportunities for learners to produce, circulate, curate, and provide feedback on materials produced within the community and beyond. Production is a major focus of the *Wrestling Boards* and *Over the Ropes*. Their production is heavily focused on digital media, including writ-

ing, graphics, and video creation. Rhashan is a 19-year-old from the United States who creates video promos for his character in *Over the Ropes*. He says, “No one else really does *Over the Ropes* like I do, to the extent of shooting real promos.” He also creates commentary videos for real matches to post on other subforums on the *Wrestling Boards*. He uses his production as a way to share his interest and get feedback from his peers to improve his videography skills. Jonathan also produces videos for the site. “I upload short WWE clips for members, often like ‘best of’ videos and such.” Practicing and using tech skills and digital media skills in production on the *Wrestling Boards* is a way that participants can explore new interests or interests they had not considered previously.

Zach, a regular participant in *Over the Ropes*, writes as his role-played character and uses his digital media skills to create graphics for himself and to teach others how to create graphics.

I like having your own character and making him/her the way you want to be. I also like the fact that now how active you are helps with how your character performs. I’ve never seen the forum so active and it’s just a lot of fun posting in character and typing up long posts and such telling off other wrestlers. Kind of makes you feel good. I enjoy helping as well. Members often need help with graphics and I’m great with Photoshop, so I offer a helping hand if needed.

Zach’s helpful stance is similar to that of Sackfist, a 19-year-old European who created all the character cards for the players in the forum. Production that benefits the community was often cited as a motivator for those who offered more technical skills to those who needed it.

Posting on the online forum is, of course, the most common type of production on the *Wrestling Boards*. The opportunity to produce by creating posts is omnipresent and many people use it as their main mode of production. Bret, a 28-year-old from the United States, says, “I mostly post, make new threads, and try to be as humorous as possible.” Kohmata, a 19-year-old from the United States, said:

[My participation in the *Wrestling Boards*] looks like long posts describing either my thoughts on how WWE should be booked, what I’d do, what they’re doing wrong/right, or how Eve is awesome. I think I’ve had three posts dedicated just to Eve and a fourth one is coming up. Had some nice discussions with Leo too. And I did give someone an idea for a paper.

Another opportunity for written production on the site is on *Over the Ropes*, the fantasy wrestling federation.

Over the Ropes, which is run as a subforum on the *Wrestling Boards*, is completely based on production by the players, the writers, and the booker. Sackfist, the booker for the federation, keeps things running. He organizes matches, encourages people to post, and keeps the writers on schedule, sometimes writing himself when needed. “I get satisfaction that I

provide a good product to the community,” he said when asked about what he gets out of this labor-intensive activity. The players are given incentive to post both in character on the preview cards and as themselves by writing detailed, critical reviews. A note on the bottom of the questions for each week’s review of the show reads, “The more you write, we will add to your HQ [high quality] post count, whether it be positive or negative. Posts can include - Your thoughts on the match, predictions on what will happen based upon the match, etc.” Critical comments are encouraged and suggestions are given freely. Mike, a writer for *Over the Ropes*, gave these suggestions before the start of the last season:

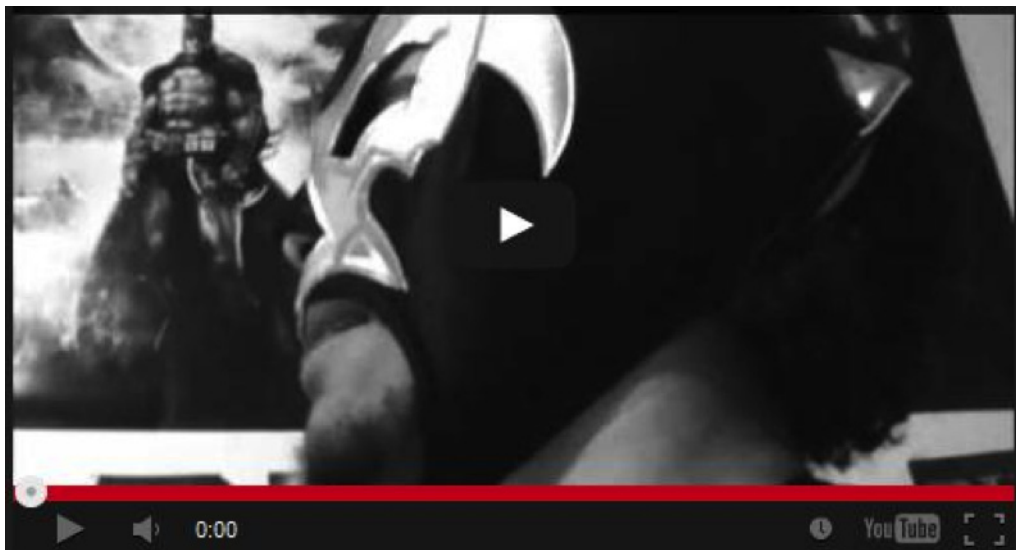
The Kayfabe [wrestling term for speaking in character] thread would also make a nice addition to the federation. I could see this getting most readers even more excited and thrilled. Plus, it would keep the federation more active as well! It would also give people a chance to speak as their superstar, or on behalf of their superstar. I believe that this should apply only to the active readers though.

Character cards would make another nice addition to those who like customization of their superstar.

Records and Wiki pages are definitely needed for obvious purposes.

All of these suggestions were implemented into that season of the fantasy wrestling federation. This continual tweaking and adjustment through production and feedback emphasizes the fan-created and controlled nature of this space.

Participants use the forum to improve their skills, no matter their experience level, which lowers the barriers to entry and creates a do-it-yourself feel to the production. Barriers to participation are also lowered by the number of community members who reach out to new members with offers of support. These low barriers to entry and participation help facilitate production, giving participants the opportunity to share their creations.



This is a screen shot of a video of Rhashan performing a wrestling promo for his fantasy wrestling character. Image courtesy of Rhashan.

OPENLY NETWORKED

Openly networked environments link institutions and groups across various sectors, including popular culture, educational institutions, home, and interest communities. Digital networks provide opportunities for producers to make their work visible across settings and for learners to more easily access this content and community. The *Wrestling Boards* community illustrates the importance of the concept of openly networked environments in providing an easily accessible online space where otherwise isolated fans can come together and share. Many participants noted that they did not try to find a local community because of the social stigma attached to being a wrestling fan. These barriers could keep participants from being able to reach out to a community; however, tech-savvy fans went in search of a community online instead.

Several participants in the study expressed the lack of local community. Leo, as mentioned in the introduction, is a 16-year-old from South America. In his local community, he does not know anyone who watches WWE. He says, “Most people despise it for the scripted nature of the entertainment and prefer to watch MMA [mixed martial arts], saying WWE is completely fake, ignoring the physical aspect of the business.” Leo has been watching WWE since 2007, when he learned about it from a television commercial. “I’d say it’s important to me because it’s my main hobby; I’m a big fan of the WWE and I have lots of fun watching it, I spend some good time of the day with WWE-related things.” After searching the Internet wrestling community, he found the *Wrestling Boards*, which supported his interest and compensated for the lack of local community supports.

SHARED PURPOSE

Online communities offer accessible opportunities for cross-generational and cross-cultural learning to take place through common interests and activities. Such communities create an atmosphere in which the role of expert and novice are based on experience with little bias toward age, whereas in traditional settings the role of expert is typically held by older people. Online communities offer youth the ability to have agency, display their expertise, and contribute to shared endeavors. Connected learning environments draw together youth and adult participants in joint activities that have defined purpose, goals, and collaborative production. *Over the Ropes*, the fantasy wrestling federation, is a shared activity that requires the collaboration and collective action of its members. The production of one week’s show works like this: The booker, Sackfist, puts up a thread called the preview card, which shows which wrestlers will be matched that week. Those participants whose wrestlers have been chosen then start to develop feuds with their opponents. The amount and quality of the participant’s activity will factor into who wins a match. Near the end of the week the preview card is closed and the show is handed over to the writers. The writers incorporate the player-created feuds into their story line for the week, and within a few days they produce an entire show with multiple matches, commentary, interviews, and backstage interaction. These shows can be as long as 85

pages. After the show has posted, the community jumps back in and writes reviews of the show—giving critical feedback on the quality of creative work and writing.

Over the Ropes is driven by a mix of social regulation and collaboration. Sackfist enforces participation rules, such as requiring members to review each week's shows. As an example, Sackfist warns participants in the fantasy wrestling federation of the consequences of nonparticipation: "Two weeks and no rating is quite serious guys, your characters are going to be affected (i.e become jobbers). Remember to get booked, you gotta post, even if your not booked one week, you still post." When *Over the Ropes* was starting a new season, the booker and writers had to remind participants not to refer to the old universe because they were creating a completely new series. For example, "You cannot reference anything from the previous universe on here. This is a completely new one. Just so you know." Sackfist reminds participants that high-quality posts are more highly valued in the fantasy wrestling federation and how to write reviews for the weekly show:

Your review is very very skimmed dude, it will pass this time, next week however it will not count. You must reference the show more

HQ [high quality] Post from Zach & CM Punk noted. Be sure you guys rate the show as not rating is a decrease.

[a player asks what an HQ post is]

They take the time to actually record their voices and post it, which we credit them for. Same as we did for Rhashan for his videos. They are putting extra work in. You are welcome to do the same.

To produce a high-quality show, Sackfist works hard to get the participants to contribute at a high quality in accordance with the rules of the game.

The participants also need to work collaboratively to get their characters booked for a match, because to participate in character, another participant's character is required for a feud. The way the fantasy wrestling federation works is that the booker assigns points to each participant for quality and quantity of contribution. Participants ask the booker for an explanation of why certain points are assigned to certain people if there is disagreement about assigned points, which affect ranking. One method of improving the quality of contribution is to create a feud with another player. The two players can collaboratively create a feud with a story line to increase both their participation in the forum and the likelihood they will be booked for the weekly "show."

Social regulation and collaboration are the mechanisms by which the participants of the *Wrestling Boards* develop and maintain shared activities. The participants regulate social interaction through the social norms set forth by Crayo and the other administrators.

For example, Crayo monitors posts on the *Wrestling Boards* for harassment and bullying, which are strictly prohibited in the community guidelines.

You agree to not use the Service to post or link to any Content which is defamatory, abusive, hateful, threatening, spam or spam-like, likely to offend, contains adult or objectionable content, contains personal information of others, risks copyright infringement, encourages unlawful activity, or otherwise violates any laws.

Crayo describes the difficulty of regulating the actions of others in an online setting:

The biggest challenge is when there's conflict with other members. The internet is a scary place sometimes and people don't give up, it's not like real-life arguments when most of the time there is a right or a wrong, it gets heated very fast online. The biggest challenge I face is keeping both those members happy and dealing with it where both members are satisfied. Sometimes it's an impossible task and I have banned members, but more often than not you help them "make up" or you show them how to ignore each other. It's handled with "reports."

Being the administrator includes managing the interpersonal issues of participants on the *Wrestling Boards*. However, the actions of those who violate the rules of the community are regulated by the community itself, as Crayo illustrates.

All users can report a post and then members of Staff and above can read this report as they get a notification. The report tells them the reason why it's reported (users click a reason before reporting) and links them directly to the post/thread which has either broken the rules or whatever. They then act accordingly.

This community regulates itself in order to maintain the enjoyable atmosphere of the site. Members approach this as part of the shared purpose of their community. By building a strong sense of community values and goals centered on interest-driven activities, members of the *Wrestling Boards* and *Over the Ropes* co-construct connected learning experiences that are both accessible and tied to skills and expertise.



Wrestling card created by the participant and the booker. Image courtesy of Rhashan.



Maria is 17 years old, from the Philippines, and in her first year of college. She has been a professional wrestling fan for about four years, starting to watch wrestling just before her first year of high school. Her very first encounter with wrestling was by chance:

There was a tie-in between a local resto here and WWE that they give this collectible cards after purchasing something. My dad brought home those cards, and then I was fascinated because I got the Trish Stratus one. I saw the showtimes and then I decided to go check it out.

Her local community was not supportive of her interest. Wrestling was looked down upon and she was called a “tomboy” for being interested in WWE. She did not have a local community to talk to about wrestling, except her little brother, who began watching with her. Maria wanted a larger community and went online to find one. After trying different communities, she settled on the *Wrestling Boards*.

The *Wrestling Boards* offered Maria a community of people who were supportive of her interest and interested in her opinion and help. She also found fulfillment in participating in *Over the Ropes*, the forum’s fantasy wrestling federation. It was a place where she felt safe talking about WWE without fear of damaging her reputation or experiencing other negative social repercussions. She felt that being able to talk and participate with people who shared her interest in an online setting gave her freedom to completely express herself. It also offered the chance to explore an interest in creative writing by writing and editing for the fantasy wrestling group that was a part of this online community. Maria had dabbled with creative writing in the past, but this was the first time she was writing for an audience

and with a specific purpose. Every week she received feedback from the community about the quality of her work in terms of both content and form. Maria confided in her writing teacher about her enjoyment and participation in this fan community; he was the only teacher she told about her interest in professional wrestling. He encouraged her to join the school newspaper, which she did, and she wrote for it until graduation. She decided when applying to colleges that she would not go directly for a degree in creative writing; instead, she decided that it was more practical for her to choose a degree as a medical technician, in which field she could use her strong writing and grammar skills for technical writing and then pursue her creative writing on the side.

Maria pursued her interest in both writing and professional wrestling through her participation in *Over the Ropes*. She was able to develop skills through feedback from community members. Maria received feedback on the content and form of her writing from people with expertise in her area of interest, creating a space for her to pursue her interest in a strategic and skill-developing way. Through exploring creative writing in this interest-powered, peer-supported structure, she improved her skill and realized her enjoyment of it, which led her to think of creative writing outside of *Over the Ropes*. Her writing teacher was able to help her connect her enjoyment of creative writing to a more technical form of writing (journalism) by encouraging her to join the school newspaper. Through her work on the school newspaper, she discovered the variety of applications possible for her well-developed writing skills. She explored the different avenues of writing until she found and settled on her current path. At present she is enrolled in a medical technical program, which utilizes her technical writing, and she is pursuing creative writing as a second major.

MAINTAINING HIGH CULTURAL STANDARDS

The openly networked nature of the *Wrestling Boards* and the accessible nature of the content offer low barriers to entry for all who want to participate. Like daytime television, gaming, and other accessible forms of popular culture, professional wrestling can suffer from the stereotype that it is a haven for lowbrow and anti-intellectual engagement. As others have argued in the case of gaming (Gee 2003; Martin 2012; Martin and Steinkuehler 2010; Steinkuehler 2007), professional wrestling fandom provides opportunities for high-quality creative work and intellectual engagement. The community meets the challenge of maintaining high standards by building a model of enculturation that participants enact through identity development and reputation management.

IDENTITY

Participants express identity in this community through the recognition of individual expertise on the *Wrestling Boards*. The identities of wrestling fans are complicated by the social stigma associated with the fandom in their local peer groups. They develop a sense of themselves in the contrasting social situations of the supportive community of the *Wrestling Boards* and in the larger, oftentimes unsupportive world (Holland et al. 1998), using multiple identities to navigate the complex landscape (Weber and Mitchell 2008). Professional wrestling is not considered geeky, as are many other cases studied by the Leveling Up team of the Connected Learning Research Network, but it is definitely considered “uncool” among most local peer groups of teens despite its large fan base. It is an interest that resonates more with youth in lower socioeconomic classes, but even those youth have trouble finding a local community to share their interest. When I asked Zach about talking to other people about his interest in wrestling, he said, “Personally, I tend to keep to myself about it.” Rhashan has a more pointedly negative view. “WWE is not something that’s like amazing to show around, it’s just something I like.” His statement expresses the shame and embarrassment he feels and would feel if he told others face-to-face that he was interested in professional wrestling. WacoKid, from Texas, who is in his 30s and the oldest community member I interviewed, had an interesting experience with sharing his interest in wrestling.

For the most part, WWE fans (or any pro wrestling fans) around here seem to be “in the closet”. But, when someone’s willing to speak up about it, it’s funny how many people know the key details or recent events about what’s going on in the WWE.

Just this evening, at a Lodge meeting, I made a comment about CM Punk and one of the other guys (who I’ve known for five years and we’d never talked about wrestling) popped off about how much better John Cena was. All of the sudden, half of the group was talking about wrestling, either old-school or modern WWE. It was probably pretty funny from an outside perspective. We were just having fun.

This idea of hiding one's interest to avoid social stigma is a common theme among the members of the *Wrestling Boards*. However, this completely changes when they feel that they are in a space that is friendly to their interest. Instead of fear of being shamed or socially stigmatized, they feel pride and engagement with the community.

The sense of pride that participants feel in their interest is made clear in how they describe their reputation in the community. Unlike Rhashan's statement above in which he talks about WWE and not himself, the statements about their enjoyment of their participation and what they get out of it are very direct. For example, Kohmata said, "I must admit I like getting posts liked or rep [reputation]," and Farooq, 18 and from the United States, echoes this, "I don't know, just interesting to see what people say to me when they rep me." Kevin, a 25-year-old from the United States, describes his status on the forum with pride and humility: "I've been called the most underrated poster on here a few times, if that means anything." Here, Kevin is referring to the idea that despite the fact that others in the community think he writes clear, well-thought-out, and interesting posts, he does not have a lot of "likes" or reputation points on the forum, which means he is not getting the overall community recognition that some in the community think he deserves. Reputation points are awarded by people who read a post and think that it is worthwhile, interesting, funny, or just worth drawing attention to; they function essentially as "likes" do on Facebook. Jonathan talks about how personal his participation in the community is: "I have made tonnes of friends on *Wrestling Boards*, which I wouldn't have known beforehand. So it's definitely brought me more into the 'WWE Family'." Nick, a 20-year-old from the United States, takes pride in the number of friends he has made as well as the number of people he has tried to bring to the board. "I have made a lot of friends from this forums. I have introduced many people to *Wrestling Boards*. Just take a look at my referrals count (713)." This pride in participation helps some move into administrative positions on the boards.

Nick and Lucky are both examples of how intense interest and pride in participation can make one eligible for administrative duties on the *Wrestling Boards*. When Nick was asked what his participation in the community looked like, this was his answer:

I'd say that it looks very good. I am always on and I have done a lot to this community which helped me gain this Admin position here. Yes, I get plenty of feedback for what I have done for this forums. I do help other people on this board in any way that I can.

He embodied the role of a pillar of the community before he was given the title of administrator and continues that role now that he has the title. He views administration as involving more positive improvement to the community through helping members, as opposed to regulatory force. Lucky experienced a similar situation.

I haven't been there particularly long only since July, but I'm the second highest poster on the board. I like to be active to help create discussions from different people. I tend to help the forum and it's users whenever I can. I'm currently being considered a moderator on the forum.

Lucky directly draws a connection between his activity level on the forum, in terms of posts and helping others, and getting named to the position as moderator. This pride in quality of participation and helping members in need is modeled by the top leadership of the *Wrestling Boards*. Crayo expresses the same intense level of activity and community involvement in his strategy. "I don't need to decide because I pay attention to it all. Partly because I own it so I need to keep an eye on things, but mainly because I'm a huge fan of professional wrestling myself so I enjoy being thoroughly involved." He demonstrates his style of leadership by his active involvement. He sees the *Wrestling Boards* as his: "I pay for the hosting, I moderate the spam, I moderate the rule-breakers and I come up with and act on ideas that I think will improve the forum." At the same time, people give Crayo suggestions that he implements in the forum. The community reports those not conforming to community standards to the staff. In contrast, Crayo, Lucky, and Nick model what is considered best behavior in the community, which establishes the perfect situation for enculturation of social practices and norms.

REPUTATION MANAGEMENT

With so much communication and information exchange it would be easy for community members to become completely overwhelmed trying to keep up. Members of the community develop a variety of strategies to determine which posts are of quality and value as well as strategies to decide whose posts they prioritize to read. Maria, a 17-year-old from the Philippines who participates both in the main forums and the fantasy wrestling federation, identifies members of the community whom she respects "because of their high quality posts and justified opinion. Length of stay also matters." This emphasis on quality and length of posts illustrates participants' taking a critical approach to assessing reputation.

When Jonathan was asked if some members of the community were respected more than others, he said he thought reputation was based on several criteria:

Legend users, as well as those who post a lot, are more respected than some. Mainly because they contribute more to the site than people who post say twice a day. Legend users are respected more because although you have to pay to become a legend, you also have to meet certain criteria (which isn't public)

Some members aren't liked as much because of their attitude, for example AID-SJohnson or Randy. The way they behave has a negative impact on the forum so people have a negative attitude towards them.

Also, I believe people who had a user ID under 50 are respected more, because like me, they've been around on *Wrestling Boards* since the very beginning.

He lays out not only the status of users, for example, whether they have reached legend status or have been around since the start of the forum, but also their level of participation and attitude toward other players. Rhashan echoes Jonathan's ideas of which members are more respected:

I pay attention to awards because they're all mostly difficult to get, but I would say it's not much a big deal. I say reputation is like the equivalent to likes on Facebook in my opinion.

There are members who are more respected, mostly the guys who've been around longer. There's also the more active and new members who get a lot of attention. I'd say the more of a presence you have on discussion, the better known you are. The only thing that all members don't like is when a user gets disrespectful, but other than that most of us are really cool towards one another.

Again, Rhashan privileges activities that are more difficult to achieve, such as earning awards. Activity on the forum and attitude also are important for him.

Most members of the community do not consider reputation points the best way to determine a player's reputation or level of community respect, as has been discussed in previous research (Preece 2001). These sorts of reputation systems are too simplistic to actually capture what makes a fellow member trustworthy and reliable and therefore, what gives them high standing in the community. Kevin describes how the reputation system is flawed, noting that people usually gain the community's respect through activity and the quality of their posts:

I wouldn't pay much attention to post likes or reputation points, as it's a somewhat flawed way of measuring a poster's quality (people often give reputation points just because someone mentioned how much they like the same football team or whatever, for example.) There are other posters who are more liked or respected, and I think it mainly comes down to how active you are, combined with intelligence. Most all here are well liked and respected, though.

Farooq answers the question of how he distinguishes respected members from those less respected by giving examples of high- and low-quality posts. Quality of posting is one way in which he distinguishes members who deserve respect.

As for members, it is very easy to tell. This forum isn't sugar coated, people will say who they like, or dislike. And you can tell when someone posts. This is an

example of a post by a respected member: 'I agree that CM Punk is good at the mic, but he is overrated in ring,' This is an example of a post by a non respected member: 'Fuck CM Punk, he's good at the mic because he is a whinning bitch, and he is shit in ring.' Respected members give fair ratings to all wrestlers and hesitate from using immature insults.

These quotes demonstrate that the members of the community do not consider the reputation system on the site to be an accurate reflection of reputation and respect for members. Instead, reputation points, as Rhashan said, are more like Facebook "likes," just a fleeting mark on a post that does not denote quality. The process by which the community determines reputation involves a much more complex set of variables, including quality of post and amount of activity on the forums, and interaction with other participants.

Reputation and trust can also be damaged. The most common way for this to happen is through the violation of the community norms. The community has specific guidelines for behavior that describe treatment of others, which it stringently adheres to.

You agree to not use the Service to post or link to any Content which is defamatory, abusive, hateful, threatening, spam or spam-like, likely to offend, contains adult or objectionable content, contains personal information of others, risks copyright infringement, encourages unlawful activity, or otherwise violates any laws.

The community also has strong cultural norms around helping and feedback, as described earlier in the section Peer-Supported, which garners respect for people who adhere to these norms. Reputation, although complex to describe, plays an important role in the functioning of the *Wrestling Boards*; those with good reputation set the tone for interactions in the community.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE CONNECTED LEARNING FRAMEWORK

The *Wrestling Boards* as a case study offers challenges but also opportunities for the connected learning framework. The major challenge is that the interest is stigmatized, which makes it difficult to find local peer support and make connections to academics. However, the peer and intergenerational bonding around the interest is strong. Wrestling fandom activities often bear the stigma of not being academically relevant, but if participants can overcome this stigma, then they have many positive opportunities for connected learning.

The major challenge of connected learning for professional wrestling communities is

tied to the stigma of being a professional wrestling fan. Many participants seek out this space because they did not have a local community that supported their interest or they found that sharing their interest with others had a negative social impact on their lives. As a 16-year-old, Jonathan faced this stigma in his local community, “No one that I know likes WWE as they see it as being ‘childish’ or ‘immature’ ... just because it’s rated PG.” Interest in the WWE presents barriers for many of its fans because of the social stigma, being seen as childish, immature, and with fans being stereotyped as believing wrestling is real and not choreographed entertainment. For many participants, these barriers were overcome when they found the online community. These barriers of lack of local community and fear of social stigma were nearly universal across my participants, even those who had been introduced to the interest by family members. The social stigma associated with being a wrestling fan caused my participants to be guarded about whom they shared their interest with in their local communities. This fear of sharing manifests itself in ways that may make it more difficult for teachers and mentors to help youth connect their learning environments.

Despite the lack of local peer support, many participants found support both through peers on the *Wrestling Boards* and through their families. The *Wrestling Boards* has a very active culture of peer-supported learning through feedback and help. The culture of the community focuses on a combination of things: interest, enjoyment, friendship, and help. Members initially seek out this space as a safe place to explore their interest, and through that find a supportive community. Zach, who has no local community, leverages the *Wrestling Boards* for support in more than just wrestling. He says, “I always know that people there are with open ears so if I have problems I can talk to them.” Interpersonal relationships and connecting is important to the community members who lack local support. The atmosphere is kept light despite the fact that they take their fandom seriously and invest a great deal of time in participation. The ability of the community to debate topics they feel passionately about is similar to the passion of StarCraft fans debating tactics, or Harry Potter fans debating nuances of a character’s personality. Jonathan sums it up best, “At the end of the day, we’re all alike and we’re like a family on *Wrestling Boards*.”

For many youth in this community, parents and family are supportive and often the point of entry into the interest. Parents often do not support other interests for youth, such as video games, that are culturally considered lowbrow, and this sets professional wrestling apart. Leo said that “my parents don’t have any problem with me watching WWE, they don’t watch it themselves but they don’t mind it at all. They are supportive, when they learned a live event was going to be held in our city they bought tickets quickly.” WWE is not very popular in his community, so given its lowbrow status, it would not necessarily follow that his parents would be supportive of the activity. Bret, a 28-year-old from the United States, has been watching wrestling since he was three years old. “My father and I would watch WWF Superstars every Saturday morning.” Rhashan also was introduced to wrestling through a par-

ent. “I started watching when I was three or two years old because my mother had introduced it to me & I was automatically entertained. In case you’re wondering that would be in the middle of the ‘Attitude Era’ of WWE, which wasn’t exactly child material.” This cross-generational family introduction to wrestling as an interest is very common among *Wrestling Boards* members. Zach mentions being introduced to wrestling by his uncle.

I’ve always watched WWE since I was little. I didn’t exactly follow it but I knew of it and my cousin and uncle watched it and we would watch it together. Not until about a year ago I started following it regularly and such. It’s nice because now I have something to talk to my cousin about when we usually can’t relate on much.

And WacoKid was introduced by his grandparents. “At first, it was with my grandparents (they died when I was 10). After that, it was mainly on my own, although I had friends who watched it also in high school and college and we would discuss what had happened.” The intergenerational nature of the interest and support of family members who are not necessarily fans illustrates the potential benefits of child-adult interaction around this interest.

Youth in the community see value in what they do and describe the learning in which they take part. The participants value technical skills, iterative learning opportunities, and what some would call soft skills. Participants in the *Wrestling Boards* narrated many of the outcomes of their participation as skills that would fit into the learning and innovations section of the Framework for 21st Century Skills (Partnership for 21st Century Skills 2009), such as collaboration and communication. Jonathan, when asked what he thought he got out of his participation, said, “I wouldn’t say I learn much from being a part of *Wrestling Boards*, maybe to accept others opinions as I can be very opinionated at times.” Hank reiterated Jonathan’s sentiment, “I get to know a few new people and get to hear the views of others that follow wrestling.” Developing innovative skills is a lifelong learning opportunity for members and helps them hone skills that they can use in their academic lives and beyond.

Because professional wrestling is considered lowbrow by society at large, many participants had trouble valuing the skills they developed through participation in the *Wrestling Boards*. But some participants did value the experience of receiving feedback that allowed them to develop their interest as well as their skills in a low-stakes, easily accessible, iterative environment. Leo said, “Well, I’ve learned new things about the WWE, met many nice new people and it feels good to be a part of a community and when people know who you are. It’s influenced me a bit because I normally get positive feedback and that’s always good.” Nick, who was a novice when he joined the forum, thought that his experience had been very valuable.

This is my first wrestling forum that I participated on and it has helped me a lot. Before this forums, I was not a part of the Internet Wrestling Community. Before, I did not used to go on to WWE sites, read WWE news/spoilers, or even knew any wrestling terms. I did not even knew what a heel or face meant. I always used to refer them as the good guy and the bad guy. Now, I know a lot and I understand a lot. The storylines make sense to me and we do a lot of predictions contest on pay per view events here and I always do good on them.

Nick was steeped in the discourse and in the information practices of the community, which offered him the opportunity to explore and appreciate his interest at a deeper level without the fear of negative social consequences. Educators and potential mentors may find it challenging to consider a professional wrestling interest as academically relevant. Just as educators are increasingly appreciating the role that electronic games can play in learning (Dijkers, Martin, and Coulter 2012), popular culture activities such as professional wrestling can also be a way of connecting youth engagement with learning. As we seek to broaden access to connected learning experiences for diverse youth, it is imperative that we meet these youth where they are, creating and building on nonjudgmental spaces—in this case, WWE fan communities.



Rhashan is 19 years old, from an urban center in the United States, and has been watching wrestling nearly his entire life. “I started watching when I was three or two years old because my mother had introduced it to me & I was automatically entertained.” His initial introduction to wrestling was during the Attitude Era. So far, he has seen an extraordinary number of wrestling shows live: “3 house shows, 8 Raws, 4 Smackdowns, 2 Pay Per Views, and 4 Wrestlemanias.” Despite his family’s support of his interest, Rhashan has no local community to discuss wrestling with. “In my home town there are scattered wrestling fans here & there, nothing intense for people my age. However, children seem to be all watching it.” Because of this, Rhashan has become guarded about sharing his interest outside of the *Wrestling Boards*. “Some of my friends have an interest in WWE and I’ve made friends on this site, but I don’t know these guys in real life. I haven’t introduced my friends to WWE. WWE is not something that’s like amazing to show around, it’s just something I like.”

Through Rhashan’s long history with wrestling he has developed a very detailed method that he uses to choose which wrestlers to support.

Daniel Bryan is my favorite wrestler at the moment. I choose wrestlers to support based on who’s not in the top tier, like Cena & CM Punk. I like to go for fresher guys and people who haven’t gotten that shot yet. However that’s the least important aspect. I think that a wrestler must of course be able to wrestle a good match, and i’ve seen some that can’t. The last aspect is mic skills, which is the ability to captivate an audience just by using a mic. It seems worthless, but it’s the mic that builds up the hype for every match.

His interest in the total package, including the theatricality of a wrestler’s performance on the microphone,

stems from his long history with wrestling as well as his interest in the creative pursuit of filmmaking and his understanding that it takes many elements to create a great dramatic scene.

Rhashan is an expert in his interest, with a long memory of its history, story lines, and wrestlers. If you ask him about his favorite wrestlers, you get answers that span a decade. He is also a heavy technology user when it comes to participating in his interest, using social media, YouTube, wrestling news sites, and forums. Rhashan has developed a web series on YouTube in which he creates analysis videos of the weekly show RAW and the annual pay-per-view event WrestleMania. He displays technical skill in video and audio editing, splicing together segments of the television broadcasts with shots of himself talking, and the audio runs seamlessly throughout each video. He enjoys this online community because it offers him a varied perspective on wrestling that is due to its diverse international community and because it gives him access to a steady stream of people who are interested in his filmmaking. Rhashan uses his digital skills in video and audio editing to enhance his participation in *Over the Ropes*, the fantasy wrestling role-playing community. “No one else really does *Over the Ropes* like I do, to the extent of shooting real promos.” Through feedback from the community, he is able to improve his video scripts as well as his video and audio production. He thinks that the improvements he made in his videography skills based on the feedback of the *Over the Ropes* role-playing community are helping him to hone his career in filmmaking. Rhashan is interested in building a larger following and connections to future opportunity, but he is still working on realizing his full potential. He has not encountered a supportive mentor in school or a community program yet, but he is hopeful that his YouTube channel will continue to draw followers. His is a story of connections and opportunity that could be built with the right institutional and relational supports.

CONCLUSION



This case study reveals how complex and multifaceted the professional wrestling fandom is through the exploration of one fairly typical fan community, the *Wrestling Boards*. Interest in professional wrestling brings members of this community together online. This is often aided by a lack of local community, encouraging participants to seek out new places to explore their interest. Community members support each other and welcome new members, with peers coming together to encourage one another. The peer support of the community fosters a learning environment that encourages exploration and skill development. Although professional wrestling is often viewed as anti-academic and lacking in intellectual rigor, this case study brings to light the level of involvement participants have and the types of skills and level of expertise required to participate. The *Wrestling Boards* offers participants a safe and supportive environment to explore their interest in wrestling, as well as utilizing academic skills in support of their interest. These academically and career-relevant skills, such as writing, digital media skills (i.e., videography, website design), and communication skills are developed and strengthened through feedback given by peers in the community.

The community exists because of its members' interest and dedication to production. The activities of the community are completely production-centered, focused on discussion, argumentation, and narrative in writing. The openly networked nature of the community allows fans to come together despite being isolated by geography. The members of the *Wrestling Boards* use the support of the community, which fosters respect and friendship, as a way to overcome their isolation, which is due to local social stigma surrounding their interest in professional wrestling. The members have a shared purpose of participating in and maintaining the forum, and they are dedicated to maintaining high standards and an educational mission. As a connected learning environment, the community allows everyone to participate with low barriers to entry. Learning in the community happens through participation and engagement. The *Wrestling Boards* offers its members new challenges because of the changing story lines of WWE and new participation opportunities in the community. The connectedness within the community and between it and the Internet wrestling community demonstrate that the *Wrestling Boards* gives members many ways to be interconnected and to participate in their interest.

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