

Being a fanboy

Dr. Steven Van Zoost



So there I was, with my cousins on a road trip to Montréal and becoming a fanboy for a little-known three-person band called *Flash-Back* who were playing in a basement pub. The night before, the street band performed at this venue to a rather apathetic crowd – except for us. We cheered on the band, got to know them between sets, and they took my request and played an improvised version of *Billie Jean*. Surprising my cousins, the next day I had T-shirts made with the band’s promotional poster on the front. When we arrived to the pub to see *Flash-Back* for a second night, dressed in our fanboy T-shirts, the band was ecstatic! Sebastian, the bass player, amped up his performance; he broke and replaced a string mid-performance. Our support for the band was infectious and other patrons began to cheer them on too. We had our T-shirts autographed and photos taken with the band. I couldn’t stop smiling.

Since that night, I have been thinking about how being a spontaneous fanboy improved the band’s performance, enhanced the atmosphere of the pub and created lasting memories. Back in the real-world of my classroom, I made connections about the importance for me as a teacher to be an overt fan of my students.

Why become a fanboy (or fangirl) of your students?

When fans show support, performance improves. When teachers show support for their students, their performance improves. When I am an overt fan of my students, I am conveying that I am interested in them, I am interested in their learning, and that I believe in their abilities as a student. The simple pragmatic intention of improving student performance is reason enough for me to become a fanboy of my students.

For some students, being their fan can provide

motivation or reward. Positive teacher attention can encourage students to continue learning, especially when they are faced with challenging tasks or challenging life circumstances. I remember one year working with a high school student who had grown weary of life in general, and school specifically. At first, it was tempting to be a fan of her brave fashion decisions: striped socks, changing hair and gold jeans. However, I did not want the student to think my support had anything to do with her appearance. Instead, I sought a way to support her academic work in English class. As it turned out, her introductory sentences were highly engaging and so I became a fanboy for how she could immediately intrigue readers to want to read more of her work.

When we become fans of our students, we have the potential to transform our classroom climate. The presence of a teacher’s appreciation can create a sense

of belonging for students who may not have experienced a great deal of individual or collective encouragement. There is something exhilarating about the sound of cheering and the united energy of a crowd; I am excited about the possibility for this to happen with students in our classrooms, schools, and communities.

Three ways to become a fanboy (or fangirl)

Be visual: An easy way to show students that you are a fanboy is to display images of them as they are demonstrating success in your classroom. Traditionally, bulletin boards have been used to demonstrate student work. Now, digital photo frames, video clips, scrapbooks, slideshows, Tagxedo and published books are used by teachers to show pride in their students' work. When students see their work posted in the classroom or images of themselves on a bulletin board, they are reminded of their moments of learning. Students and teachers are connected in these moments of learning and the visual display encourages students to remember that the teacher values their learning and is interested in their success.

Go public: In our increasingly digital world, it is becoming easier for teachers to promote student success in school newsletters, podcasts, local newspapers or news sites, or a classroom blog. Students appreciate it when teachers show support in public spaces where parents, friends, family and communities can extend a student's fan base. This year, I asked students to read an essay called *Avatars Not Included* that was written two years ago by a previous student and published in a class anthology as part of a social action project. By using this essay, my current students learned that I am a "wannabe fanboy" and that I am keen to share my support for students in the world beyond our immediate class. I was, and remain, a fanboy of this student's writing.

Personalize: You can tell that you are a fanboy when you personalize your support. Students like it when teachers provide tailored feedback or offer comments that could only

be given to a specific student. Over the last several years, I have been using voice recording software to communicate with individual students. I am told, although not convinced, that they enjoy hearing the tone of my voice (for better or worse) as I respond to their work. When I get stuck about what I am going to say to the student, I imagine that the student has become the next Canadian Idol and I have a poster to hold up at their concert. What would I put on the poster so that they would recognize my voice in the crowd? I also imagine a slogan to go on a customized T-shirt of support.

I admit, my instinct to create a *Flash-Back* fanboy T-shirt may not be shared by others. Becoming a fanboy takes practice. In fact, the idea of demonstrating such public endorsement for an unknown band in Montréal probably occurred because of my practice of showing overt support for students in my classroom in Windsor. However, the benefits of being a fanboy are worth the efforts of this mindful practice. Being a fan of my students helps me maintain a positive focus in the classroom, builds confidence for students to take risks in their learning and helps to create a culture of encouragement. Becoming a fanboy is not new to me; I have a history of expressing my fanboy habits. In my first year of teaching, not unlike the *Flash-Back* T-shirt, I created a tie that included the pictures of all of my Grade 7 homeroom students. To this day, when I meet students from that class, they ask me if I still wear their tie. I do.

Fanboy is a term used to describe a male who is highly devoted and biased in opinion towards a single subject or hobby within a given field (source: Wikipedia).

Dr. Steven Van Zoost is a teacher at Avon View High School, Annapolis Valley Regional School Board.