Strengthening Students' Understanding of Environmental Concepts Through Fan – Based Art – Making (Cosplay)

Joy D. Talens

College of Education, Arts and Sciences

De La Salle Lipa

Lipa City, Philippines

jydlpn@yahoo.com

This study aimed at investigating students' experiences regarding fan – based art – making particularly Cosplay or costume play to strengthen their understanding of environmental concepts. Qualitative research approach was adopted in the study among three sections of college students enrolled in the course Environmental Science. The data of the present study were gathered through a questionnaire that included 7 open – ended questions. The data of the research were gathered in First Sester at the 2012 – 2013 academic years and were analyzed through descriptive analyses. It was found out that students' understanding of 4R (reuse, refuse, reduce, recycle), preservation, management and conservation of the environment were strengthened as they enjoyed and appreciated their preparation, participation and presentation in different ways. Cosplay is a strategy that combines ecology and art to motivate the cosplayers and fans or spectators to closely relate and interpret such portrayal to increase understanding of the environment.

Keywords: Fan – based – art making, Cosplay, environmental concepts

1. Introduction

Environmental Science is one of the General Education subjects being offered by any higher education institutions in the Philippines. All students intending to finish a four – degree course should enroll and pass this subject. To make the students particularly the non – majors knowledgeable of the basic ecological concepts that govern the environment is the main goal of the subject. As stewards of God's creation, it is expected that their love and concern for the environment be rekindled. Likewise, students are expected to actively participate in various environmental advocacies as leaders or members of the community to conserve and preserve the environment.

As an institution of higher learning, De La Salle Lipa, Philippines is utilizing the concept of transformative learning among the General Education subjects to attain its mission of teaching minds, touching hearts and transforming lives among its students. This approach of learning is based on the constructivist framework that considers learning as a personal process that happens within and to the learner. It does not only place the learner at the center of the process, but it also makes the learning process an authentic venue for personal growth and development (Maridable, 2007). Likewise, in a transformative learning class like Environmental Science course students

were required to demonstrate what they have learned through performance task or product. Thus, during the First Semester of the School Year 2012 – 2013, the Environmental Science classes were assessed through final performance task, particularly in the form of fan – based art making.

Fan – based art – making refers to three dimensional work that copies, appropriates from or illustrates media produced stories and characters (Jenkins, 1992 as cited by Manifold, 2009). Costume play or Cosplay is one of the form of fan art that involve creating costumes, dressing and performing or posing as characters derived from popular literatures, especially Japanese manga and animations (Manifold, 2009).   It is the practice of portraying a fictional character at times completely identifying as that character while in costume (McIsaac, 2012).   The four elements involved in Cosplay are narrative, set of clothing, performance and a subject or player were incorporated in the performance (Lamerichs, 2012).   Considering that many adolescents are interested in this fan – based activity and fan interests which often begin during middle school years (Manifold, 2009) and only few studies had explored its application in the academe (Lamerichs, 2011) the researcher investigated students' experiences as they demonstrated their understanding of environmental concepts through Cosplay.   The researcher also believe that if Cosplay will be the final performance task in Environmental Science course, students will be required to dress up in costume made from trashes, participate in the fashion show and display or act like superheroes or any character or anime they would like with power or ability to practice 4R (recycling, reuse, reduce and refuse) and protect, conserve and manage the environment then they there understanding of environmental concepts will be strengthened. This is proven by the statement of Lamerichs (2011) that enacting stories can create positive changes in many people's lives.   Likewise, the researcher had been guided by the findings of Graddy (2010) in which art is considered as an effective and powerful way to bring ecological education and awareness to the public. .

With all these things in mind, the researcher investigated the experiences of students enrolled in Environmental Science course on how Cosplay strengthened their understanding pf environmental concepts.

2. Methodology

Qualitative research approach was adopted in the study. Three sections of Environmental Science classes with a total of 135 students were the participants of this study during the SY 2012 – 2013, De La Salle Lipa. All participants were group randomly into twelve to conceptualize and create costumes from trashes they brought and perform on stage, acting and doing fashion show as characters derived from Japanese manga, a movie, sci – fi or fantasy characters displaying their own identities, roles and powers to change man's destructive practices towards the environment. The data of the present study were gathered through questionnaire that included seven open – ended questions.   This will enable the researcher to figure out the whole picture since it allows participants to express their exact opinions or beliefs (Ekiz, 2003 as cited by Anagun & Ozden, 2010).   In order to obtain college students' experiences as they participated in Cosplay, all questionnaires were administered to them after the activity.   The data obtained were analyzed through descriptive analyses particularly axial coding.

3. Findings

3.1. *Students' experiences on how Cosplay strengthened understanding of environmental concepts*

Students shared variety of experiences on how Cosplay strengthened their understanding of environmental concepts.   To illustrate, *"students demonstrated the 4 R (reuse, reduce, recycle and refuse) as they used trashes such as newspapers, plastic bottles, CDs as costumes of their chosen character or anime"*.   Likewise, they were *"enlightened on the importance of taking care of the environment like discovering new ways to make trashes usable and became responsible in using materials available at home and in the community"*.   Thus, several students commented that *"there is fashion in trashes"*.   As a consequence of this activity, students were *"encouraged to throw their trashes properly"*; *"became creative"*; *"motivated to deepen their understanding about recycling"* and *"enabled them to make pledges to do recycling"*.

Understanding concepts of conservation, management and preservation of the environment were strengthened through fan – based art – making particularly Cosplay.   According to one student, they were *"warned on various human activities that destroy the environment"; "reminded them to lessen trashes at home"; "rekindled love for environment"; "motivated them to become responsible"; "recalled the importance of the environment"; "became knowledgeable of the earth as a system"; "became aware of what is happening in the environment;" enlightened students that even in simple ways we can take care of the environment";*and *served as a reminder that we are God's stewards of His creations"*.   Students also observed that *"every power of the Cosplayer has something to do with the environment"*.

As a result, students *"learned how to be creative in transforming trashes to useful ones";"enabled them to make a stand on to solve environmental problems in their own ways";* and *"learned how to be resourceful"*.

When the experiences examined as a whole, it was found out that Cosplay as a form of fan – based art making enabled students enrolled in Environmental Science course to demonstrate their understanding of environmental concepts as each group conceptualized a three dimensional media - produced character, designed costumes in the most creative and resourceful ways as possible and decided the power of their Cosplayer over the environment given a limited period of time.   They became aware that they must do something to protect, conserve and manage it.   These findings are supported by Graddy (2010) that art is an effective and powerful way to bring ecological education and awareness to the public.   In addition, if creative members of society can participate meaningfully in realms with which art seems to have little to do, destructive practices can be changed and begin to see resources in a new way (Graddy, 2010).   It had also been observed that participating in this activity students' way of thinking towards the environment had changed. Thus, the goal of transformative learning design had been achieved that learning is a personal process that happens within and to the learner (Maridable, 2007).

3.2.   *Students experiences on how Cosplay enabled them to identify and relate themselves with the different characters*

Students were able to identify and relate themselves with the different characters portrayed by the Cosplayers.   While doing Cosplay, students *"believed that their chosen character has a*

Lasallian heart to help the environment thus, they love the character of "Nina of Teken" portrayed by their Cosplayer. They also *"believed that people have innate power to conserve, preserve, and protect the environment".* Some students shared that *"like heroines, they realized that they should also be models in taking care of the environment".* Like the anime their group conceptualized,*" students wanted their surroundings to be clean and peaceful".* On the other hand, some students explained that *"although their character has negative impact to people, he is concerned with what is happening in the environment".* Others shared that *"even they do not have discipline in throwing litters; they believed that their chosen anime "Supah Womanizer" can change them".* Others can *"identify themselves with their heroine "Bb. K" for the protection of nature".* Another group shared that *"one of the powers of their anime is to stop flooding thus; they realized that as citizen we should do things or activities that prevent flooding".*

Some students emphasized that like the anime portrayed by the Cosplayers, *"they are very willing to conserve and preserve the environment"* .Other students explained that like their chosen anime, *"they already practice recycling".* *"Whenever they buy something, they refuse to get a paper or plastic".* As a consequence of the Cosplay and being the one who portrayed the heroine, one student *"pledged to conserve, protect and manage the environment".* Although someone shared that *"the characters were too powerful to take care of the environment and practice recycling, thus he can not relate to them",* most students believe that *"they found meaning in participating and watching Cosplay because all the characters where students' concepts or ideas on how to protect the environment".* Likewise, *"they wanted to participate in environmental activities like this and they are willing to have a better nature and environment".*

It is evident that students related and identified themselves with the character or anime each group conceptualized. This statement is supported by Bonnichesen (2011) that Cosplay functions as an arena for identity creation. Likewise, modifications had been done particularly on the powers or special abilities each Cosplayer possessed. This is so because students were required to conceptualize powers or abilities to protect, conserve and preserve the environment. It had been observed also that there are similarities or differences on how the group presented or impersonated or idolized these characters. This is explained by Lamerichs (2011) that most Cosplayers do not wish to exactly duplicate the character they portray; rather, they want to bring something of their own. The most important thing was that these characters have powers to protect, conserve and manage the environment. Cosplay enables young people to gain a sense of identity, experience the advantages or disadvantages of behaving in particular ways and is persuaded that through enacting messages they might make positive changes in their lives. It is also worthy to note that students believe that each person has an innate desire to take care of Mother Nature. However, through Cosplayers actualized a narrative and its meaning and they actualize their own identities (Lamerichs, 2011). Therefore, it can be concluded that participation in Cosplay rekindled students' willingness to take care of the environment.

3.3. Students' experiences on how their group conceptualize the character for the Cosplay

Various groups came up with different strategies to conceptualize the character or anime they portrayed. The following were strategies they used: *"enumerating first all the*

4

anime/superheroes and choose the best that can help the environment";" synthesizing the suggestions of every member of the group"; and *"coming up with cartoon inspired but environment friendly anime".* Other groups preferred to *"design the costume first before thinking of a character".* For some groups they claimed that *"they were inspired by computer games Teken and Japanese uniforms and combined all powers of anime character".* Others based their anime on the *"character of Sailor Moon but has power over the environment".* For some they *"sat first together, planned and executed – doing the costume first, power and portrayal".* *"Brainstorming on what is happening in nature and from there come up with the anime"* was the strategy of some groups. Others just *"proposed what was in their minds and divide the tasks".* One group shared that their *"character was conceptualize mainly by the male members of the group who are playing computer games and did the costume design because the anime was based on their favourite computer game".* One of the groups *"asked the assistance of the members of the group who are fans of anime and share their ideas".* Other groups *"decided to use as many trashes as possible for their anime and divided task such as the ones who will design and make shoes, head dress, skirt, blouse and ammunitions".* One group thought of *"a character inspired with our La Sallian values, thus they chose native superhero named "Animopan" (Peter Pan) who has magical arrow that can change garbages into biodegradable ones".* Others chose *"EnviPink"* whom they based on their subject Environmental Science and Pink Girl. Others came with the concept of *"Enchantress"* – who is a Sailor Moon inspired character; *"Nina of Teken"* who is very powerful and beautiful with the power to restore the environment and maintain it; *"Nature Warrior"* with the power to revive plants and animals that died because of human activities; *"Trash Captor Sakura"* who can control Earth's temperature and weather; *"Supah Womanizer Swan"* who can change the individual to become a responsible citizen who will take care of the environment. Some groups *"chose an anime that best fit the characteristics of their Cosplayer, and the uniqueness of the anime and its impact to the audience or spectator".*

It had been observed that students had their own strategies on how they conceptualized the characters that will represent their respective groups. The character they had chosen should be someone whom they believe has power to protect, conserve and manage the environment. This is proven by Lamercihs (2011) that Cosplayers identify themselves in multiple ways with the characters they portray. Thus, they were able to relate or identify the character with protecting Mother Nature. It is also worthy to note that participation in this activity enabled students to demonstrate in a concrete way whatever they learned in the classroom. As what Lamerichs (2011) emphasized, Cosplay motivates fans to closely interpret existing texts, perform them and extend their own narratives and ideas.

3.4. Students' experiences on how did the group conceptualize the costume

The following strategies were done by the different groups to conceptualize the costume of their Cosplayer: *"using all trashes as possible";* *"dividing the task";* *"combining all ideas/ suggestions of members of the group";* *"using newspapers as skirt with CD designs";* and *"choosing from the sketches done by their group mates".* Others claimed that they *"visualized Sailor Moon and thought of her power over the environment".* Given the limited time of an hour to

conceptualize and prepare, one group were able *"to surf the net for some ideas"*.   Another group *"sorted all green colored trashes and designed them into cap, suit and pants as well as arrow and anchor of Animopan"*.   Another group shared that they had *"plenty of pink pages in the magazine so we came up with EnviPink and they came up with a very good anime characters that fit the beautiful Cosplayer"*.   On the other had a group thought of *"a simple costume but with impact to the audience"*.   One group shared that their *"anime costume was seen in one of the pages of the old newspaper brought by one of our group mates and further improved it"*.   One group shared that their *"costume is a combination of modern day anime and love for nature"*.   Because *"the group brought numerous old CDs, they used these as the main costume so they came up with CD – R Queen"*.   All in all, the *"best strategy was that every member of the group worked together as a team"*.

While conceptualizing the costume, it was observed that students were *"very much motivated to think of a very unique costume"*.

Like conceptualizing the character, students had different strategies to come up with costumes which is one of the elements of Cosplay (Lamercih, 2011) in preparation for the fashion show.   Manifestations of creativity and resourcefulness among members of the group had also been demonstrated as they tried their best to come up with unique costumes made from almost all available trashes they brought with them.   This is supported by Lunning (2012) that style carries implications of individual self – expression as well as group identification   Indeed, cosplay is an outlet for fans of manga in which they can dress up as their favourite characters (Bonnichesen, 2011).

3.5. *Students' experiences on what they appreciated most when preparing for the Cosplay*

Many students commented that they appreciated the preparation they did for the Cosplay. They appreciated the group's *"teamwork"; "creativity"; "participation"* and *"volunteerism"*. Some students noted that they were *"having fun while preparing for the Cosplay"*.   Likewise, they had the *"chance to meet new friends"*.   Moreover many students *"appreciated brainstorming session where everyone shared their ideas"*.   In the process they were *"given the chance to communicate with others"*.   Furthermore, most students shared that through preparation for the Cosplay they *"became appreciative of one's work"; "enjoyed the company of others whom we had just met";* and; *"appreciated efforts of each member of the group"*.   They also claimed that they were *"proud to say that I am one of the designers of our costume"*.   For some the preparation was *"not boring"*.   Others explained that they were *"given the chance to share their love for making things related to fashion"*.   Others felt that *"they really belong to the group"*.   Another student shared that *"importance of time management had been emphasized in the activity"*.   Others noted that *"students were very eager to come up with beautiful costume"*.   For some they *"appreciated the power of imagination"*.   It was *"a good experience for those who were first time to join"*.

Students *"learned recycling more"*; and *"realized that waste materials can be transformed to a work of art and art skills"*.

It had been noted that students appreciated the preparation they did for the Cosplay.   Aside from the strengthening their understanding on how to protect, conserve and manage the

environment, there are other things they learned and discovered from themselves and while working with their respective groups.   This is supported by Bonnichsen (2011) that Cosplay is an element by which social groupings are built and through complex social structuring identity is created by attaching oneself to the group.   He also added that Cosplay is a social activity to construct individual identities through social interaction. Likewise, participants in the Cosplay enjoy the challenge of constructing a costume, doing the make – up, creating props and then experience the thrill of having others appreciate and enjoy what they have created (Herring, 2012). With all these new discoveries and insights, participation in a Cosplay is a meaningful experience.

3.6. Students' experiences on what they appreciate most in the presentation of the characters

Students appreciated the presentation of the characters in the Cosplay which includes fashion show, portrayal of powers and question and answer. It had been shared by the students that *"all contestants performed well"; "they were very funny";* and *"they had great impact to the audience, thus the audience understood/appreciated the character portrayed by the Cosplayers".* One student claimed that *"Cosplayers players made the audience excited".*

Many commented that they *"appreciated the costumes of the Cosplayers from trashes".* Students *"never imagined that the end products were environment friendly".*

For some, they appreciated the presentation through the strategies applied by each group such as *"good choice of contestants who were very good in modelling, portrayal and question and answer portions"; "designs of costumes were artistically done"; "very unique presentation appreciated by the audience";* and, *"interesting character and costume".*   Likewise, others appreciated the *"sharing of output and what one stands for regarding the environment".*

Many students believe that it is worthy to appreciate also efforts of the group and thus they *"appreciated each others' works and they were proud of what they did, hence they experienced sense of achievement".* Likewise, they were delightful that *"all groups were very competitive"* and *"everyone is supportive of their contestant".*

Presentation of character for the Cosplay had been appreciated by almost all students enrolled in Environmental Science course.   Generally it can be noted that choice of contestant is a factor. It can be observed   that each contestant performed well in this activity that combine ecology and art.   Contestants did their best in the fashion show, presentation and question and answer as if they were real super heroes.   Rosenberg (2011) and Del Greco (2011) explained that for many people, putting on the costume of a superhero is a way of becoming the best version of themselves.   It allows people to feel like they have more power or abilities that they do not have in real life (Del Greco, 2011). It is also worthy to consider that through group effort, students were able to choose the best characters that can be identified with their contestants and come up with the most artistic costumes they had worn made from trashes. As what Martin (2012) emphasized, creating identities is the important dimension of Cosplaying.

3.7. Student's experiences while watching the Cosplay

Students shared that they enjoyed watching Cosplay.   Different emotions had been experienced. They were *"amazed watching contestants wearing costumes made from trashes".* Many students claimed that they observed that throughout this activity *"recycling things was very*

evident". One student shared that *"it is really wonderful to see costumes on stage prepared by each member of the group"*. Another one claimed that "b*ecause of the costume, - audience were always looking forward to the next contestants"*. One of the students shared that she *"because of the costume she loved to watch Cosplay"*. On the other hand, most students *"enjoyed cheering for the contestants because they were really very good in question and answer portion"*. It was "*very entertaining"*. Likewise, most students shared that as audience they *"were having fun";* and *"enjoyed watching different costumes and characters"*. They also shared that *"everyone was grateful to their group mates"* and; *"everyone was very excited cheering for their group"*. Many students claimed that "*smile in the face of the audience never faded all throughout the presentation";* and, "*scream of the audience surrounded the entire venue because of the funny but smart contestants*".

Most students shared that generally, "*the presentation was interesting and students really cherished each moment"*. For others *"this was their first time to experience this kind of environmental activity"*. Likewise, the presentation was *"not boring instead it was very entertaining"*. All in all students claimed that they appreciated *"environment – friendly activity such as Cosplay.*

It had been noted that students have varied positive experiences while watching Cosplay. Aside from the fact that creativity and resourcefulness had been manifested through group efforts, students appreciated recycling as an environmental concept as evident in the costume they had worn. Likewise, it had been noticed that all contestants displayed their powers or abilities to protect and conserve the environment that amazed the spectators or audience. Lamerich (2011) had proven these statements and explained that the values or features of a character are projected onto the player by the spectators and player himself or herself. Lamerich (2011) added that the interpretation of the narrative changes for the same group which can be seen as a performance that enriches the existing story or story world. These are the reasons why spectators or audience looked forward to see the next contestant wearing his or her costume made from trashes and what is or are his or her powers of abilities. Manifold (2009) further explained that Cosplay supports the fans or spectators' emerging internal and external senses of identity. Likewise, Bonnichsen (2011) explained that participation in Cosplay helps people locate themselves in the world and guide them in the decisions they will make in life. It had been observed also that spectators or audience cheered and supported their contestants for they believed in their character and the powers or abilities they possessed. They added that they really had fun while watching the contestants. Rosenberg (2010) as cited by Del Greco (2011) explained that Cosplay in which social connections are formed buffers people from stress, boosts the immune system and provide a sense of belonging. Thus, these things are the reason why students claimed that through Cosplay they were able to display or demonstrated their understanding of environmental concepts while having fun or being entertained.

4. Conclusion

Cosplay as a form of fan – based art – making strengthened students' understanding of environmental concepts particularly in practicing the 4R (reuse, reduce, recycle and refuse) and in conserving, protecting and managing the environment. In an activity like this, students were able to practice 4 R specifically recycling as they made use of trashes to create costumes for the character students personified.   Likewise, students were able to come up with different anime inspired - characters that have special powers and abilities to help control and manage the environment through group efforts. While enjoying the activity, Cosplayers and spectators or audience were able to relate to their characters and powers as they perform their role as stewards of God's creation.   In addition, students' awareness and concern for the environment had been rekindled as they combined ecological concepts and art. Thus, Cosplay as an example of fan – based art – making can be utilized to strengthen understanding of environmental concepts among students as it motivates not only the Cosplayers but also the fans or spectators to closely relate and interpret such portrayal to increase understanding of environmental concepts.

References:

Bonnichsen,(2011), Cosplay: creating or playing identities? [Online] Available:http://www.su.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:424833/FULLTEXT01 (October 23, 2012)

Graddy, (2010), Creative and green: art, ecology and community [Online] Available: http://www.greenmuseum.org/generic_content.php?ct_id=238 (October 23, 2012)

Herring, (2012), Cosplay and wearing our character [Online] Available: http://thinkchristian.net/cosplay-and-wearing-our - character/ (October 23, 2012)

Lamerich, N. (2011). Stranger than fiction: fan identity in cosplay. Transformative Works and Cultures, 7. doi:10.3983/twc.2011.0246.

Lunning, (2012),Cosplay and the performance of identity [Online] Available: www.quodlibetica.com/cosplay-and-the-performance-of-identity (October 23, 2012)

McIsaac, M.   (2012).   What is cosplay and why do people do it?.   [Online] Available: http://ifanboy.com/articles/what-is-cosplay-and-why-do-people-do-it/ (October 23, 2012)

Manifold, M. C. (2009). What art educators can learn from the fan – based artmaking of adolscents and young adults. Studies in Art Education a Journal of Issues and Research, 50, 257 – 271.

Maridable, (2007), The general education curriculum of De La Salle University – Manila in a transformative learning environment [Online] Available: http://www.ialu.net/portal/Conferences/conferenceVII/downloads/Maridable_english.pdf (May 20, 2011)

Rosenberg, (2011), Being a superhero – it's about costume? [Online] Available: http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-superheroes/201104/being-superhero-its-about-the-costume (October 23, 2012)

Martin, (2012), Cosplay hand in hand with reality boosting self – esteem [Online] Available: http://www.cosplayshopper.com/blog/cosplay-hand-in-hand-with-reality- boosting-self-esteem/ (February 19, 2012)