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The Pedagogy of the Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives: A Survey

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Abstract

This study examines pedagogical uses of the Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives (DALN), an online, publicly available, searchable database of autobiographical stories about literacy development. The DALN <daln.osu.edu> aspires to make visible the everyday literacy practices of ordinary people, a mission that makes it an invaluable resource for scholars and teachers. In particular, the DALN offers opportunities to deepen and complicate pedagogical approaches to literacy narratives in composition, rhetoric, and literacy studies. This article briefly reviews the historical uses of literacy narratives in composition courses before turning to current experiments incorporating the DALN. Based on surveys and conversations with instructors, the authors categorize and synthesize various approaches, providing specific examples and instructors' reflections that offer insights and highlight areas of concern. The final discussion considers what this research suggests about best practices and critical questions for educators interested in using the DALN in their teaching.

Keywords: DALN; Literacy studies; Composition: Rhetoric; Pedagogy; Narrative; Public; Archive; Digital media; Multimodal

If you've been to a conference on composition, literacy, or pedagogy lately, chances are you've been recruited to share a story with the Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives (DALN). The brainchild of Cynthia L. Selfe and H. Lewis Ulman, the DALN is "a publicly available archive of personal literacy narratives in a variety of formats (text, video, audio) that together provide a historical record of the literacy practices and values of contributors, as those practices and values change" (DALN). Beginning from a collection of interviews with local academics, the DALN has grown exponentially over the past five years; at the time of this writing, it contains over 3,500 literacy narratives with diverse demographics, subjects, and media. This expansion has been made possible by outreach efforts that have encouraged educators around the country to become formal associates and informal assistants in the DALN project.

The authors of this study are among the partners and fans of the DALN. Comer was fortunate to serve as a research assistant during the project's launch in 2007 while studying rhetorical theories of narrative and composition pedagogy at The Ohio State University. This kairotic combination has since influenced her teaching; in various courses, she uses the DALN as a public space that invites students to critically engage with and compose their own literate lives. Harker has served as a DALN assistant at regional and national conferences for several years, recruiting participants

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and collecting narratives. He uses the DALN in both undergraduate and graduate courses at Georgia State University, employing the archive to introduce students to the defining concepts of New Literacy Studies: namely, the literacy myth (Graff, 1991); literacy sponsorship (Brandt, 2001); ethnography and literacy (Heath, 1983); strong theories of literacy (Street, 1993); and other interdisciplinary theories of language acquisition and development. Our own investment in the DALN has meant that we are regularly engaged in conversation with other users about how and why it has influenced our research and, more so, our teaching. These discussions regularly demonstrate the rich diversity of work inspired by the DALN; in turn, they have inspired us to share some of that developing knowledge. In particular, we are interested in why teachers are incorporating the DALN into their pedagogy, how they invite students to participate in this project, and what strategies they have developed to do so productively. By gathering, categorizing, and reflecting upon these uses, we aim to build a foundation for best practices and future development of the pedagogy of the DALN within (and potentially beyond) composition, rhetoric, and literacy studies.

1. Context

In many ways, the rise of the DALN reflects the popularity of the literacy narrative genre in contemporary composition studies. For years, composition has invested heavily in what J. Scott Blake (1997) termed "the literacy narrative industry" (p. 108). During the 1990s, discussion of literacy narratives focused on students studying others' stories of literacy development in order to better understand their own. Peter Mortensen and Janet Carey Eldred's (1992) "Reading Literacy Narratives" defined this genre as fiction or nonfiction texts that "foreground issues of language acquisition and literacy," both oral and visual (p. 513). This move to incorporate readings about literacy into composition courses encouraged students to discover insights and inspiration from seminal works like Frederick Douglass's *Autobiography* and George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*.

Despite the popularity of this approach, some scholars offered critiques of the resulting literacy narrative model. For example, J. Scott Blake (1997) and Caleb Corkery (2005) cautioned that the use of such models—specifically attention to published, polished exemplar narratives—might stabilize the ideas and stories of a few select authors and preserve limited conceptions about literacy and literacy development. As New Literacy Studies has shown, commonsensical attitudes about literacy, often rooted in autonomous and ambiguous definitions of literacy (Barton, 1994), make possible a host of unintended pedagogical consequences. Such approaches have "the potential to marginalize student writing" and "reinforce high/low distinctions between professional or literary and student writing" (Blake, 1997, p. 114). In response to these risks and the increased emphasis on students' own writing as texts, most current discussions focus on having students compose and reflect upon their own literacy narratives.

Because literacy narrative assignments tend to position students as experts in their own literacy development and agents in future learning, they play a significant role in student-centered pedagogies (e.g., Scott, 1997; Bishop, 2000; Williams, 2003; Alexander, 2009; Kinloch, 2010; DeRosa, 2008). Likewise, literacy narratives are considered particularly effective in basic/developmental writing and second language learning (Sandman & Weiser, 1993; Anokye, 1994). The form and content of these assignments reflect expanding definitions of both literacy and narrative, resulting in subgenres like the technology autobiography (Kitalong, Bridgeford, Moore, & Selfe, 2003; Kirtley, 2012) and multimedia experimentation (e.g., Kinloch, 2010; Scenters-Zapico, 2010; Poe, 2011). In different contexts and across multiple media, literacy narratives have been praised for their ability to foster self-reflection and confidence. Other key advantages of this approach for students include the following:

- *Critical perspective.* Studying their own literacy development encourages students to "recognize the social-constructedness of their literacy attitudes and practices" and "recognize and critique their literacies in light of the discourse communities to which they belong" (Scott, 1997, p. 112). In this way, "[b]y foregrounding their acquisition and use of language as a strange and not a natural process, authors of literacy narratives have the opportunity to explore the profound cultural force language exerts in their everyday lives" (Soliday, 1994, p. 511). The result may be a more nuanced understanding of the play of power, access, and agency within and beyond institutional education.
- *Identity construction.* The process of composing literacy narratives encourages students to "claim ownership of their experiences" (Kirtley, 2012, p. 194); they can thereby "help validate students as authors and writers.. . [revising] their definitions of themselves as writers" (Scott, 1997, p. 112). The resulting narratives "confer upon students the importance and relevance of personal experience. They demonstrate how the individual voice can prevail over