

The Literacy Myth in the Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives

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Abstract

One of the central endeavors in contemporary literacy studies is to interrogate traditional definitions of literacy and deconstruct literacy myths. The Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives (DALN), a publicly accessible online repository for literacy narratives, implicates itself in this effort. This essay examines instantiations of the literacy myth within literacy narratives and the archive itself. An analysis of the content and design of the DALN offers insight into how the archive provides contributors both subversive and traditional frameworks for understanding literacy and literacy narratives. Then an examination of three digital literacy narratives in the DALN demonstrates how a combination of narrative analytics can be directed towards revealing constructions of the literacy myth in the telling and meaning-making of individual lives.

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1. Introduction

One of the central endeavors in contemporary literacy studies is to interrogate traditional definitions of literacy and deconstruct the literacy myth. The Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives (DALN), a publicly accessible online repository for literacy narratives, by its very nature implicates itself in this effort. The DALN was first envisioned by Cynthia L. Selfe, H. Lewis Ulman, and Scott DeWitt of The Ohio State University in 2005 as a site of an historical preservation of personal narratives about “literacy practices and values” (personal communication, 2011; DALN homepage). Recently, because of the archive’s scope—it contains over 2,800 literacy narratives¹ from a diverse range of contributors in terms of nationality, race, ethnicity, age, class, and educational background—and because of its Institutional Review Board approved status, researchers, teachers, and scholars have looked to the archive as an academic research tool. Notably, the archive was not initially designed to prioritize research needs, as the OhioLink Digital Resource Commons, which is intended to preserve, protect, and provide access to materials produced by Ohio’s public colleges and universities, funded it ([Digital Resource Commons, 2011](#)).²

Because the DALN was founded and is facilitated by rhetoric, composition, and literacy scholars, it could be easily misidentified as an academic research archive and thus subject to critiques of the narratives’ validity as qualitative research data. Although originally not intended to function as a research tool, Ulman is attempting to make the archive

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¹ The DALN contained 2,842 narratives as of January 1, 2012.

² This source largely limits the scope of what the funding can be used for. OhioLink privileges providing taxpayers with access to the work done by public universities over customizing design and data infrastructure for particular projects ([Digital Resource Commons, 2011](#)).

more functional for researchers through the addition of new search features and data infrastructure.³ In a forthcoming collection, the DALN Consortium⁴ will demonstrate how to effectively use the archived literacy narratives by revealing their constructedness through narrative analysis.⁵ I suggest that connecting this narrative analysis to the literacy myth will explicate how the narratives in the DALN, both individually and collectively, contribute to or challenge cultural beliefs about literacy. Furthermore, I will demonstrate how the DALN and the inherent nature of literacy narratives hail narrators into literate identities framed by the literacy myth. Ultimately, I provide an analytic that, when applied to literacy narratives and the DALN, reveals instantiations of the literacy myth in both the archive and its narratives.

2. The literacy myth

Literacy studies scholar and social and cultural historian Harvey J. Graff first defined the literacy myth in his 1979 historical study of literacy, *The Literacy Myth: Cultural Integration and Social Structure in the Nineteenth Century*. Along with John Duffy (2007), Graff later gave a succinct explanation of the myth:

The Literacy Myth refers to the belief, articulated in educational, civic, religious, and other settings, contemporary and historical, that the acquisition of literacy is a necessary precursor to and invariably results in economic development, democratic practice, cognitive enhancement, and upward mobility. Despite many unsuccessful attempts to measure it, literacy in this formulation has been invested with immeasurable and indeed almost ineffable qualities, purportedly conferring on practitioners a predilection toward social order, an elevated moral sense, and a metaphorical “state of grace.” (p. 41)

Part of this myth is the inability to define literacy, what it means to possess or attain literacy, and what literate individuals are supposed to accomplish with literacy (Graff, 1991, p. 323). Instead, literacy becomes a norm that does not have one accepted definition or one set of implications. Nonetheless, the literacy myth is used to dominate those who are classified as illiterate, functionally illiterate, academically illiterate, or any other number of classifications. Graff’s work is significant not only in the identification of the literacy myth and the practices of domination that use the myth, but in his historical tracking of factors like ethnicity, race, age, and sex that are the true “origins of illiteracy” (Graff, 1991, p. 56).

Graff’s historical work on literacy as well as the theoretical work of New Literacy Scholars has made literacy researchers aware of the existence and pervasiveness of the literacy myth and led to the investigation of these problematic understandings of literacy in recent scholarship. Yet, because of American entrenchment in individualism, the pervasiveness of the bootstraps mentality, and psychological processes that push us to seek order and causality in our world, western society continues to be invested in the belief that literacy is a guarantor of success in all areas of life. Thus, narrators operating in this paradigm tend to frame their literacy narratives in relation to the literacy myth, and literacy narratives must be understood both as a site of revelations about the literate lives of narrators as well as demonstrations of personal and cultural investment in the literacy myth.

The former scholarly investment in the literacy myth is partially the result of a constellation of literacy studies, including those of great divide theorists, who claim oral or “nonliterate” cultures are less civilized than traditionally literate cultures and literacy learning improves cognition (Havelock, 1982; Goody & Watt, 1963; Ong, 1982). These research conclusions were then contested by other literacy researchers like Scribner and Cole (1981), who, after studying the oral culture of the Vai of Liberia, concluded that learning to read and write does not reprogram the brain to function at higher cognitive levels in all endeavors. Other germinal studies by Gough (1968), Finnegan (1973), and Heath (1983) reject the great divide theory, eventually leading to the emergence of New Literacy Studies (Barton, 1994; Gee, 1996; Street, 1993).

³ Currently, the archive is a folksonomy that is searchable by keywords in the full text, abstract, series, author, title, description, keyword, language (ISO), mime-type, sponsor, and identifier. The archive can be browsed by date submitted, author, title, subject, and collections, which currently consist of A Comprehensive Collection, African-American Women University Professors, Community Literacy, DALN Advisory Board Members and Staff, Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing Contributors, Editors Picks, For the Love of Literature, OSU FYWP AU2009, OSU FYWP AU2010, Social Activists, and Undergraduate Students of Color. Ulman is currently working on building alternative search tools.

⁴ The DALN Consortium is made up of the DALN founders and other scholars, teachers, and community members who work with the archive.

⁵ See the new Computers and Composition Digital Press publication, *Narrative Theory and Stories that Speak to Us* (The DALN Consortium, 2012).

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