

Letter from the Editors

New Literacy Narratives: Stories about Reading and Writing in a Digital Age

This special issue of *Computers and Composition* presents research on new directions in literacy narrative studies—research that presses us to consider new methods and theories for the study of stories, literacies, and the teaching of writing. Each essay in this issue frames composition research, literate identities, and contexts for teaching and learning as inseparable from the “interconnected streams” of literate practice and 21st century writing technologies (Leander, 2009). In keeping with traditions from earlier research, authors feature new literacy narratives as classroom assignments; components in teacher training; data for the study of composing process; tools for the analysis of cultural constructs; and agents for political change. Because literacy narratives have been defined and used in many different ways and for very different purposes, this introduction begins with a short history. This discussion reviews some of the ways researchers and teachers have used literacy narratives, and sets the stage for how new literacy researchers envision stories about reading and writing in contemporary research contexts.

1. Literacy narratives in writing research and teaching

The term literacy narrative was first used to refer to autobiographical writing such as “Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative* and Mike Rose’s *Lives on the Boundary*, or novels, plays, and films ‘that foreground issues of language acquisition and literacy’” (Eldred & Mortensen, 1992, p. 513, in Soliday, 1994, p. 511). What might be named a literacy narrative ranged from “a Hawthorne short story [to] *The Color Purple*, and *Educating Rita*” (Soliday, 1994, p. 511). This early use of autobiographical writing about literacy experiences primarily focused on literary works as a way to identify and document factors that shape writers’ identities and practices.

Teachers and teacher researchers soon began using literacy narratives in new ways, particularly in the classroom. Rather than asking students to read literary stories about reading and writing, they asked them to compose their own literacy narratives. These autobiographical writing assignments generally asked students to write a more or less coherent exploration story about experiences with literacy over the course of their lives. Many assignments included sets of prompts for invention work; directions for in-class group work or peer workshops; and provision for formal presentations. These assignments gave “writers from diverse cultures a way to view their experience with language as unusual or strange” (Soliday, 1994, p. 511). By looking at experiences, contexts, and cultural constructs associated with reading and writing as stories, students saw past their original assumptions, and began to question why and how particular practices, values, and beliefs became “the way it is.” Since the 1990’s, classroom literacy narratives have helped students address social justice issues, increase agency, and unpack conflicts between identities and (academic) writing (e.g., Carpenter & Falbo, 2006; Corkery, 2005; DeRosa, 2000; Rabin, 2008; Sohn, 1998; Williams, 2004).

A second early use of literacy narratives was as data for teacher research. By creating narratives similar to Rose’s reflective analyses, writing teachers used their experiences as learners as a basis for thinking about how to develop more effective, more relevant writing pedagogies. Peter Elbow’s (1998) autobiographical digression in *Writing without Teachers*, as well as the introduction to the second edition, are outstanding examples of how writing teacher-researchers have used literacy narratives. Studies using reflective autobiographical writing as a basis for assessing and re-imagining writing pedagogies, often in light of social justice issues, have been foundational, ongoing uses for literacy narratives (e.g., Rondinone, 1991, and Young, 2004).

The use of literacy narratives by both teachers and researchers has, from the outset, focused on naming, analyzing and challenging cultural formations that marginalize or exclude nonmainstream writers. This social justice agenda enlisted both literary autobiographical writing, such as Rose’s (2005) *Lives on the Boundary*, and less polished, oral

stories collected from everyday writers by ethnographers and oral historians—such as the dialogues and reflections in Dorothy Sheridan, Brian Street, and David Bloome's (2000) *Writing Ourselves*, a participatory, ethnographic “mass observation” project.

Many ethnographic studies of literacy, such as *Writing Ourselves*, include stories or anecdotes that might be named literacy narratives; at the same time, these stories may or may not include the reflective, synthetic moves characteristic of teacher-researchers' autobiographical writing and student writing assignments. Passages from interviews in Shirley Bryce Heath's (1983) influential study, *Ways with Words*, fall in this class of literacy narratives—stories about experiences with reading and writing—as do sections from Anne Herrington and Marcia Curtis (2000) in *Persons in Process*. Heath's study includes personal stories where narrators report but do not always interpret their stories; the interpretative moves in Heath's work are part of a larger narrative crafted by the researcher. In *Persons in Process*, the authors are also participants (the teachers) in students' stories about literate development. The book's analysis begins with back-stories created by the researchers' discussion of interviews and student writing; these back-stories are developed into interpretive stories to explain what students' experiences mean. While in many ways these interpretive stories were collaborative, the theoretical story to explain the students' literate lives is primarily a creation of the researcher. As in Rose and Elbow, the purpose of this work was to expand understanding of writing and the teaching of writing. In contrast to work by Rose and Elbow where the researcher interprets his or her own experience, in ethnographic works like *Persons in Progress*, researchers do most of the writing that creates a theoretical story to explain their subjects' experiences.

While both Heath and Herrington and Curtis' work is clearly ethnographic, it connects to two slightly different definitions for literacy narratives, and is in some sense a prototype for definitions of the kinds of narratives collected and created through interviews, oral histories, and observation. Literacy narratives reported in Heath's work or the mass observation project, are self-authored stories—with connections to autobiographical writing. Like literary, autobiographical narratives, they reflect the author/participant's perspective both on what happened and the interpretation of what happened. Literacy narratives produced by Herrington and Curtis suggest a compound definition, with more than one layer of storytelling: the process for creating these narratives was interactive, and the product—a theoretical story about “persons in progress”—was a reflective, analytic story, that was also synthetic; it drew from observations and recollections by multiple participants, and it integrated experiences from over the course of a life into a focus that offered insight into literacy learning and personal growth during college.

One problem with this discussion is that it suggests certain ethnographic works as “literacy narrative research” when they were not necessarily regarded as literacy narrative research at the time. Work by Deborah Brandt (2001) clarifies definitions and provided theoretical language for literacy narrative research. As defined in the introduction to *Literacy in American Lives*, literacy narratives may use methods similar to ethnographic work, but literacy narratives are generally both more rooted in the perspective of the individual subject (the author of the stories about literacy), and more sharply attentive to social, political, and economic factors that extend beyond the community of study. Also, ethnographic work may not “fully address the mixed motives, antipathies, and ambivalence with which so much literacy is learned and practiced” (Brandt, 2001, p. 8). While literacy narratives from ethnographic work may not meet all criteria set forward by Brandt, as pointed out in Krista Bryson's analysis of data available in the Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives (DALN), broad definitions of what counts as a literacy narrative can provide useful new data (within this issue).

In addition to offering a clear definition of literacy narratives, Brandt's work contributed conceptual terms to identify experiences reported by participants. Two particularly important terms were of “literacy sponsors” and “economics of literacy.” Literacy sponsors were “delivery systems for the economics of literacy, the means by which these forces present themselves to—and through—individual learners...[and] the causes to which people's literacy usually gets recruited” (p. 19). Brandt's work helped establish language for understanding and talking about literacies as elements in larger cultural systems, and her study identified particular correlations among subjects' experiences, identities, material cultural circumstances, and the social constructs that framed the telling and experience of those experiences.

2. New literacy narratives: Reading and writing in a digital age

As changing technologies have both complicated and personalized individual relationships to literacies, studies of literacy narratives have become increasingly popular. A quick search of dissertation topics associated with literacy

narratives shows that during the last 25 years, 218 theses have featured literacy narrative projects; 136 of those studies were conducted since 2008, and all but 11 were conducted within the last 10 years (ProQuest Dissertation & Theses Database). While early dissertations focused on close analysis of autobiographical writing, recent interest has shifted toward observation, oral histories, and ethnographic studies. An overview of research titles suggest that this increased interest corresponds with broadening definitions of both “literacy” and “narrative,” and with continuing interest in documenting and theorizing literacies through the lens of social justice.

Studies from the late nineties often mention new literacies as part of subjects’ experiences with reading and writing, but it was Cynthia Selfe and Gail Hawisher’s (2004) *Literate Lives in the Information Age* that moved the focus of literacy narratives from print to computer literacies. *Literate Lives* also recast and supplemented theoretical language associated with literacy narratives research in ways that accounted more accurately for new literacy practices. Brandt’s concept of literacy sponsors was revised to include entities or individuals who “enable, support, teach, model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress or withhold literacy” whether or not they benefit from sponsorship; and the term “technology gateway” was coined to refer to “places and situations” where participants gain the technological access that allows them to pursue digital literacies” (Selfe & Hawisher, 2004, p. 5). Selfe and Hawisher’s theoretical language was framed within Marilyn Cooper’s concept of a cultural ecology: a “constellation of factors [social, economic, educational, technological] that can affect—and be affected by—electronic literacy acquisition” (Selfe & Hawisher, 2004, p. 5). In keeping with literacy narrative research’s social activist roots, Selfe and Hawisher included subjects’ voices in the analysis of their stories; interview subjects participated as coauthors of their chapters, and had the final say in the way their stories were told.

Although Selfe and Hawisher connected directly to Brandt, definitions and practices from earlier work continued to play a role in new literacy narrative research. Autobiographical narratives in the tradition of Rose and Elbow provided a basis for new theory and practice for teaching with technology (Crow, 2006), and for training teachers to teach with technology (Journet, 2007). This approach has also played a key role in the exploration of social justice issues associated with new technologies, increasingly globalized culture, and resulting changes to literate practice (Banks, 2006; Pandey, 2006; Quarshie-Smith, 2004). Literacy narratives in the ethnographic tradition have been important in large demographic studies documenting national literacy trends (Livingston; Bober & Helsper, 2005) and in multiple case studies exploring changing identities, cultural constructs, and practices for teaching and composing associated with new literacies.

Autobiographical classroom assignments have been renamed as new literacy narratives, technological literacy narratives, techno-literacy autobiographical narratives, among other things, and are increasingly created in digital formats including websites, animated PowerPoints, videos, and digital stories. While these projects—sometimes accompanied by reflective analysis by course instructors—are increasingly available at online at course websites, in online journals, and in the Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives (DALN), John Scenter-Zapico’s (2010) e-book, *Generaciones’ Narratives: The Pursuit and Practice of Traditional and Electronic Literacies on the U.S. - Mexico Borderlands*, was the first book-length scholarship to capitalize on the unique possibilities multimedia literacy narratives offer for representing literate lives. *Generaciones’ Narratives* uses two multimedia features in its presentation of the narratives: embedded videos and mouse-over translations. The audio-visual representations introduce rich ground for multiple, complex interpretation that is not necessarily accessible through alphabetic text, and the simultaneous translation allows subjects to speak “in their own words” to mono-lingual listeners. Like Selfe and Hawisher, Scenter-Zapico expands and refines existing theoretical language to account for borderland residents’ experiences with new communication technologies.

Finally, the creation of the Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives <<http://daln.osu.edu/>> has further extended ideas about what counts as a literacy narrative, the structures those narratives might engender, and how research methods and methodologies can offer useful interpretations of what those narratives can tell us. As defined on the DALN, “a literacy narrative is simply a collection of items that describe how you learned to read, write, and compose.” This definition opens up the idea of narrative to include representations that are not word-based, and allows structures that go beyond or simply fall outside of print-based assumptions about what counts as a story. Such a definition is necessary to encompass storytelling associated with wordless, visual/aural representations associated with new media, and it positions an emerging generation of literacy narrative researchers to articulate new definitions, new research practices, and new theories. Essays that follow explore some of what new literacy narrative research can tell us in these exciting new times.

3. In this issue

The issue's first essay, Susan Kirtley's "Rendering Technology Visible: The Technological Literacy Narrative," revisits theory and findings from traditional literacy narratives as they integrate multimedia writing into definitions of literacy. Kirtley's assignment positions students to articulate and reflect on literate identities in their own voices. As in assignments described by Soliday and others, Kirtley capitalizes on writing's power to make narrated events "strange." She uses collaborative, class discussions to press students into noticing the invisibility of new communication technologies in writing process. By moving back and forth between writing and talk, students become aware of and assess their enlistment in stories associated with identity, writing, and technology. The assignment's structured reflection on literacy stories makes visible the intrusion of gendered/raced/classed story-forms associated with new technologies, identities, and writing practice. Kirtley notes that, as in traditional literacy narratives, new literacy narratives position students to articulate and critique relationships between literacies and cultural ideologies; and she emphasizes those composition instructors stand to learn as much, if not more, from student narratives than their teachers. Her article illustrates how student reflections press composition teachers both to let go of old assumptions about what students do and do not know about writing technologies, and to keep up with the realities of composing in a digital age.

Kory Lawson Ching and Cynthia Carter Ching's "Past is Prologue: Teachers Composing Narratives about Digital Literacies" uses an assignment for techno-literacy autobiography narratives (TLANS), both as a teaching tool and as a research strategy for studying how teacher experiences with technology shape future classroom practice. Written in the tradition of literacy narratives that help researchers reimagine teaching practice, Ching and Ching produce findings relevant both for student teachers interested in using past experiences as a way to enhance their future teaching with technology, and for teachers of teacher training courses interested in enhancing training for literacy instructors. The study assigned TLANS to future teachers in a graduate seminar. Using the story-based protocol from Selfe's and Hawisher's *Literate Lives* as a guide, students composed an essay focused on contextualizing and interpreting their experiences with literacies and technologies. One important finding was that these future teachers had few positive models for teaching with technology in their own school experiences. Experiences with technology and writing in primary and secondary school primarily were perceived as either undefined or irrelevant. The use of TLANS allowed both the researchers and the students themselves to recognize the shortcomings of their teaching past, to identify better teaching models, and to look forward to new possibilities for teaching in the future.

"Multimodal Composing in Digital Storytelling" by Yu-Feng (Diana) Yang uses Gunther Kress' model of design and Leo van Lier's theory of affordance to analyze composing processes used by two future English teachers studying at National Sun Yat-Sen University in China. As in Herrington and Curtis' study, Yang was the teacher in the participants' classes. She used a combination of interactive interviews and analysis of artifacts to create narratives that theorize students' composing process. Yang's data included the multimodal digital storytelling projects, a composing narrative, observations of class presentations, and follow-up interviews associated with the projects. The findings build on existing models of multimodal composing processes, and demonstrate the synergistic relationships among meaning making, the order and choice of (hybrid) media during the brainstorming process, and author intentions surrounding the text. As in studies of print composing, Yang's subjects discovered what they had to say through the composing process. Yang's work extends these findings associated with print processes by documenting and theorizing the roles played by choice of medium and (multi) modality in the meaning making process.

The final two essays illustrate how emerging communication technologies complicate social justice associated with literacies. Todd Ruecker's "Exploring the Digital Divide through Literacy Narratives" studies digital divides experienced by students as they move from high schools to colleges along the border of the United States and Mexico. As in ethnographic studies, literacy narratives in this research were constructed through observations and interviews, rather than written by students themselves, and the project explores the importance of literacy narratives as tools for characterizing digital divides. Ruecker presents two narratives, each of which includes detailed, particular data on how digital divides manifest and evolve both at the individual level and within institutional ecologies. The presentation and analysis of participants' stories amply support the essay's central claim that quantitative studies that governments and institutions primarily rely on for information about "falling through the net" are not well-suited to answering the kinds of questions and problems associated with digital divides. Moreover, broad-based studies lack both the contextual, explanatory details, and the constructive insights that Ruecker illustrates as readily available in literacy narrative data.

The final essay draws together many of the practices and objectives characteristic of literacy narrative research. In “Analyzing Identity Construction in the Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives,” Krista Bryson describes the DALN’s interface, and examines how its broad definition of literacy narratives, along with the often context-free character of contributions, demand new theories for how “narratives” embody, connect to, evade, or subvert cultural constructs associated with literacies, particularly the literacy myth. Her discussion observes how and why the DALN’s format demands new orientations toward its data. For example, while DALN “narratives may not be (accountable) evidence of the facts about literacy in peoples’ lives” they do in fact provide “evidence of ‘the language and narrative structures people use when they talk about literacy’ in the particular context and time of [the] telling” (Ulman, personal communication, as cited in Bryson). Among other things, Bryson argues that the DALN’s format coupled with its fragmented, often anonymous, and richly diverse collection of narratives inherently encourages a critical stance toward cultural discourses, and her analysis of narratives collected for the DALN develops possibilities for “theorizing” the DALN collections.

While this issue develops some of the possible directions for new literacy narrative research, admittedly it has only scratched the surface. New communication technologies pose new representational forms almost as quickly as we can imagine them, and “stories” now unfold in forms that have not yet been fully theorized. What is more, theory from literacy studies and other related fields such as narrative research and identity development (see for example Andrews, Squire, & Tamboukou, 2008) offer new critical lenses for understanding story forms. As suggested in Bryson’s analysis of the DALN, changing technologies prompt us to engage in more rigorous study of how stories are told—and press us to deeper analyses of what they say. Our hope is that the new ideas in the articles that follow will open up both ideas and dialogue about possible directions for literacy narratives in composition studies.

Sally Chandler is an associate professor and coordinator of the Master of Arts in English—Writing Studies at Kean University in New Jersey. Her interests include new literacy studies, narrative analysis, feminist ethnographic methods, and participatory action research, particularly in collaboration with student research partners. Her work has appeared in *Computers and Composition*, *Feminist Teacher*, *Composition Studies*, and in *Digital Writing Research: Technologies, Methodologies, and Ethical Issues* (2007, Hampton Press). She is currently finishing *New Literacy Narratives from and Urban University: Stories about Reading, Writing, and Changing Technologies* (Hampton Press), a book-length study with student coauthors who use narrative analysis to theorize their stories about literacies and technologies.

John Scenters-Zapico is an associate professor in the Ph.D. program in Rhetoric and Writing Studies at the University of Texas at El Paso, where he teaches classes in traditional and digital literacies, e-portfolios, and the historical role of technology in writing studies. Additionally, he is director of the University Writing Center. His works in progress include *The Literacy Reader* (forthcoming Oxford UP), and two-book length ethnographic studies, one titled *Literacy in the Margins: The Emergence of Electronic Literacies in Low Wage Workplaces, and the second Mexican Migration and its Effects on Education*.

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Sally Chandler
John Scenters-Zapico