

## Rendering Private Writing Public in the DALN



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A few weeks ago, a graduate student in my literacy studies course, Andrea (a pseudonym), stopped in to see me during my office hours to discuss her literacy narrative. For years now, I have been assigning students to compose literacy narratives. More recently, I have also begun to require that they upload the final drafts of their literacy narratives to the Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives (DALN). The DALN already has a built-in IRB-approval process, so I don't have to get it at my university. I also want to assist the DALN in building a robust archive of this important genre in our field. Andrea and I discussed her ideas for her audio literacy narrative, and she became enthusiastic about the different avenues she might pursue. After this brainstorming session, Andrea grew quiet. She looked uncomfortable, so I asked her if there was anything else she needed. She replied with one question, "Is it mandatory for me to post my literacy narrative to the DALN?"

I nodded in the affirmative and gave her a few reasons I had given in the past about why I require and value this aspect of the assignment, which had always satisfied my previous students. Andrea, however, was not persuaded. She explained that she didn't feel comfortable posting her literacy narrative online in this capacity. She clarified that she was completely comfortable sharing her essay with her peers for studio review workshop in the confines of the classroom but that she did not want her essay to be made public in this way. Yet, she also didn't want her grade to be negatively impacted and was inquiring about the options. She asserted that, as a private writing assignment, she shouldn't be forced to post her literacy narrative to the DALN. And wasn't this against FERPA to make this a requirement?

I understood her hesitancy about making her writing public. In past years, I had had a few students who didn't want to post their literacy narratives there, but in all of these cases, they compromised by posting their literacy narrative anonymously. Yet, Andrea did not want to make this concession. She didn't want to share the story she wanted to write publicly. I then asked her if she could compose a story that she would be willing to share publicly. She replied that she could do this but that then the assignment wouldn't be meaningful to her because she was just doing it to fulfill criteria—that her heart wouldn't be in it. I could tell that Andrea was not going to budge, so I told her to give me a few days to consider her request.

Andrea's probing questions about whether or not, as an instructor, I can (or should) require students to make their work public in this manner led me to consider and reflect on why I require my students to post their literacy narratives to the public space of the DALN. I first learned of the DALN during a semester when Cindy Selfe served as the Watson Professor at the University of Louisville where I was a graduate student. Since then, I have been an advocate of the DALN. I have sat at the CCCC booth and recorded interviews for the archive. I have contributed literacy narrative assignments to the DALN, and my students have supplied literacy narratives to the archive. In short, I view the DALN as an important public space where students can make their academic work public. Rendering academic work public has long been a value in composition, and I believe it's worthwhile to ask students to post their literacy narratives to a public archive like the DALN.

For one, making their work public has the potential to enhance student agency, empowerment, and authority. In posting to the DALN, the writer joins a community of others who are also sharing their literacy narratives. By participating in this community, they gain authority as one voice among many, an important voice that "has the confidence and position to speak out and the potential to influence others" (Danielewicz 423). The "little narratives" of literacy (Alexander; Daniell) that students offer have a chance to be heard beyond the classroom, which can yield confidence as they claim this public space. Jane Danielewicz argues that "writing in personal genres, where the 'I' is at the center, not only develops voice and cultivates identities but also enhances authority. Authority increases the chances that individuals are able to participate in public discourse, which is, ultimately, agency" (421). The DALN

thus gives students an opportunity to participate in the public sphere by adding to, and perhaps nuancing, dominant public discourses surrounding literacy, language, and identity, an opportunity that positions them as active stakeholders in these important conversations.

The DALN also has the potential to challenge dominant notions of literacy, schooling, and education—to serve as a space for argument and advocacy. While the genre of the literacy narrative is most often viewed as personal, reflective writing rather than explicitly argumentative, the apparatus of the DALN and the individual stories contained within have the potential to change the status quo and impact assumptions, views, and decisions on literacy development and acquisition. I explain to students that our field “is deeply connected to matters of broad public interest” (Rose 291), and posting literacy narratives encourages action and engagement with public writing and advocacy work. Taken together, the student literacy narratives in the DALN cultivate broader, more inclusive conceptions of these issues. The literacy narratives illustrate how literacy is embedded in specific practices and cannot be separated or defined apart from the contexts in which it is used. The texts represent diverse scenes of literacy (homes, schools, libraries, living rooms, bars, churches, study abroad courses, and football fields) and sponsors of literacy (parents, teachers, ministers, coaches, military officers, doctors, institutions, etc.). The topics vary greatly—from homeschooling, learning with a disability, spoken words poetry, and swimming to religion, cooking, and gaming. The composing modes include audio, video, alphabetic text, and visuals. Student essays also “uncouple composition and schooling” and emphasize “the experiences of writers not always visible to us inside the walls of the academy” (Gere 80). In short, posting literacy narratives to the public sphere indicates an orientation to action.

By defying traditional limiting notions of literacy, student literacy narratives have the potential to expand public consciousness—to educate other kinds of readers of the archive, such as policy makers, teachers, governmental leaders, parents, and communities. As such, it becomes a “public act of persuasion” (Royster 150) and facilitates social change (Weisser). In short, the DALN calls its audience to see the diversity, multiplicity, multivocality, and multimodality of the stories shared in this public space. Without student voices, the potential to alter public views on these issues is significantly lessened.

A third reason I ask my students to post to the DALN is to emphasize generosity and reciprocity. In past courses that have emphasized undergraduate research and in graduate courses in literacy studies, I have required that students select literacy narratives from the DALN to use as their data sources for their research essays. Not only does posting their own literacy narrative help them gain familiarity with the DALN as a system (tagging, uploading, sharing, etc.), which will be beneficial to them when they begin analyzing the literacy artifacts, but it also highlights the importance of generosity—if you use, you contribute. On a practical level, student literacy narratives expand the database of literacy narratives, which is useful for researchers, scholars, and future generations of learners. While most of my students may never use the DALN in a professional context after they graduate, they will likely engage in research where they will need to rely on the generosity of others. Contributing to the DALN instills a spirit of reciprocity, cooperation, and mutuality and can aid them when they begin to ask things of others.

After a few days of reflecting on whether or not I would require Andrea to post her essay to the DALN, I called her back into my office. I first asked her to explain again her resistance to posting to the DALN. Then, I told her that I would let her decide, but before she did I wanted to explain in greater detail the reasons I valued this endeavor. She listened to me as I explained why: reciprocity and generosity, preparing her for the research essay, expanding the database, making her writing public, and so on. She chose to keep her essay private.

Although Andrea did not want to claim this public space, her questions challenged me to carefully consider and be able to articulate why a pedagogical philosophy that asks students to make their private work public is important to me, beneficial for my students, and a valuable aspect of my courses. Student writing that enters public spaces has the potential to foster democracy, inclusion, and diversity, yet when students don't want to participate in the public sphere, I have a responsibility to respond to their needs and work to empower them in other ways.

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