

Optimistic Reciprocities: The Literacy Narratives of First-Year Writing Students



Kiosk I: Starting Places

In the spring of 2009, as I was completing the second year of a four-year term as the director of the first-year writing program at The Ohio State University, I was trying to imagine a creative way of answering a question our new graduate teaching associates asked each fall while they were finishing a three-week training to prepare them for their first quarter teaching at the university:

*Just who are the students we will be meeting
in a matter of days?*

It was a legitimate question, one fueled by equal parts excitement, anticipation, and uncertainty. Many were first time instructors. But even for those with teaching experience, most were new to Ohio State, and many of them did not attend an Ohio high school. Furthermore, most of them did not complete a first-year writing course themselves as undergraduates; for a variety of reasons, they thrived at academic writing and were told a first-year writing course was not necessary for them.

The writing program staff and I brainstormed a number of options for answering their questions. We had lists of statistical and demographic data from the university we could share with instructors, but that wasn't really getting at the heart of what they were asking for. We could try to create a list of characteristics gleaned from our own teaching experiences, but that seemed disingenuous and flat. We could try to recruit a small group of first-year students to attend the training workshop and sit on a panel and answer questions from our instructors, but there was a certain unknown element to this plan that made us somewhat nervous at a time when one of our tasks at hand was to calm the anxieties of these new instructors.

Our creative solution was to make a short video, featuring first-year students, that we could show to instructors. We planned to recruit first-year students before they had ever taken a course at Ohio State and interview them about their literacy experiences and practices. (We would also have this film on hand for other purposes throughout the year, and we could show the film during the training workshop for a few additional years before it lost its timeliness.) The university orientation program gave us contact information for students who lived within close proximity to the university whom we hoped would come to campus and give us thirty minutes of their time.

We used the Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives (DALN) to collect, house, and secure permissions for the interviews. The DALN had the infrastructure in place for our project, and ultimately, we were asking students to provide us with literacy narratives, so the fit with the DALN seemed natural. Even though we planned to create a highly edited, documentary-style video for the purpose of training new instructors that would not be housed in the DALN, we felt that archiving raw narratives could potentially serve teachers' and researchers' needs at a later date (a decision from which this exhibit is benefitting).

An undergraduate student assistant I had worked with on previous projects emailed over 200 students:

“For the past year, I have been working with faculty in the Department of English on a project about literacy. I have interviewed students from several different schools, each with their own diverse background and their own individual and remarkable story to tell. . . . All of these stories were captured on video and are now part of the Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives (<http://daln.osu.edu>). . . . This summer, I am working with the Director of the First-Year Writing Program, and we would like to talk to new, incoming students from The Ohio State University. We are writing a select number of students to ask them to volunteer to tell a short story or two about learning to read, write, or compose. We would be very interested in hearing your stories. Perhaps you could tell us about learning to read English (or Spanish, or Arabic, or Mandarin Chinese?) with your parents, or of learning to write at school? Can you tell us a story about digital media composition--have you ever made a web page, a podcast, or a video? Do you have an opinion about the way literacy is changing--are blogs, social networking sites, or online role playing games the future of literacy in your mind? Do you write regularly for fun? What kinds of things do you like to write? . . . A short amount of your time could help shape the curriculum for writing courses at Ohio State. And who knows, in the future, you may want to work for the Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives, too. ”

I asked the assistant to consider a set of questions that were drawn from a writing assignment students would complete as their first homework assignment that reflected the major tenets of the course curriculum and would give instructors a sense of where their students were starting in the class. I strongly suggested to the assistant that he create a set of questions that he could ask each interviewee, but I also instructed him to be flexible and run with a new line of questioning depending on the answers he was hearing. In other words, his end product—the short film—would be easier to structure if there were continuity across the interviews. However, more compelling stories that the questions were not directly prompting might emerge, and he would not want to cut off these unexpected opportunities.

In the summer of 2009, nine students volunteered to share their stories with us to be made into a film for new instructors. The final product was a twenty-six minute film that, to date, has been used in the training of three incoming groups of graduate teaching associates.



The students' interviews were also archived in the DALN. Whereas these interviews represent highly motivated, self-selecting students, they also create a profile of student literacy practices, conveyed in stories prompted by open-ended questions, that demographic information cannot. The full video narratives of five of these students housed in the DALN serve as the data for this exhibit.



Next: Optimism, Hope, and Anticipated Reciprocity