
LITERACY NARRATIVES AS GENRES OF POSSIBILITY: STUDENTS' VOICES, REFLECTIVE WRITING, AND RHETORICAL AWARENESS

Susan DeRosa

Assistant Professor of English
Eastern Connecticut State University

I. Writers' Struggles With Literacy Myths

Each semester, I encounter writers in my first-year college composition courses with preconceived ideas about literacy and what it means “to be literate.” Some of the myths writers subscribe to about literacy are encouraged by an assessment-focused education system: high school writing assessment tests; statewide mastery tests; SAT scores; or later in their academic careers, writing placement essays in universities and colleges. Whether learned in educational settings, at home, or culturally emphasized, literacy myths often assign writers a particular literacy status or label them as “weak” or “strong.” An example of a literacy myth that still permeates college writing courses begins with writing placement tests. Students may undergo a series of placement tests prior to entering college which assess, assign, and rank or track students into particular writing courses at the university. Consequently, students use the language of assessment and ranking to identify their abilities as writers in a university environment, thus the labeling continues. Further, literacy myths may limit their perceptions of themselves as writers, restrict the ways that writers engage in writing activities, and limit their writing processes. Throughout the semester, students sometimes identify themselves as “good” or “bad” writers (i.e. the indignant student: “My *other* English teachers always told me I’m a *good writer* and gave me ‘A’s on my papers—why did you give me a ‘C’?” or the writer with little motivation to write: “I’ve always been a *bad writer*” or “I’m in the class for *bad writers* because I didn’t do well on the placement test.”). Oftentimes, writers’ self-perceptions are based on the outcomes of standardized writing assessment tools or what they’ve been told by “the experts.” Finally, the narrow definitions of literacy that writers bring with them to first-year composition courses reinforce ideas about “literacy” as a fixed or static construct—a set of skills to be measured in a single writing event/test or acquired in a semester of a college writing course. As a composition instructor, I often ask myself two questions: “What pedagogical strategies could I use to offer my writing students a space to reflect on, or even challenge, these limiting ideas about literacy?” and “How would such reflective writing encourage them to rethink their roles as writers—writers who make choices based on rhetorical situations?”

The problems and promises of reflective writing continue to be a contentious issue in the field of composition. Composition scholars Janet Eldred and Peter Mortenson argue that student-written literacy narratives which “foreground issues of language acquisition and literacy . . . are

structured by learned internalized ‘literacy tropes’” [Linda Brodkey’s term], and emphasize “prefigured ideas about literacy that include explicit images of schooling, and affirm or challenge culturally scripted ideas about literacy” (513). Thinking about literacy narratives in this way might suggest that the genre has the potential to propagate literacy myths. However, I want to argue that students’ literacy narratives could provide a space for them to rewrite versions of their literacy experiences and events—narratives that move beyond these myths. To challenge prescriptive ideas about literacy, writers need to become active participants in the construction of their literacy development, and concepts about literacy need to be reconfigured by the writers themselves. By expanding their definitions of literacy, students can understand literacy as a fluid construct, one that is continuous, contextually and socially informed, and dependent on a particular rhetorical situation. As writing instructors, we need to find ways to re-conceptualize literacy learning—to see how literacy varies from situation to situation and from writer to writer. As Deborah Brandt and other literacy scholars argue, “literacy is always in flux” (Brandt, “Accumulating,” 666). Literacy narratives may provide us with an opportunity to explore changing versions of literacy and writers’ visions of themselves as writers.

As a composition instructor who incorporates literacy narratives into her pedagogy each semester, I find that student-produced literacy narratives can encourage self-reflective learning and help students develop a sense of critical agency about their literacy practices. I assign literacy narratives so students can reflect on their *continuous literacy experiences* throughout the writing course as they encounter a variety of genres and rhetorical situations. By writing sequences of literacy narratives in conjunction with their genre-writing projects, students may become aware that their literacy does not just emerge after they complete one writing assignment in which they “study literacy” or produce a single writing assignment. Instead, students come to understand literacy learning as continuous and changing, rather than as a static experience that happened in a past isolated event (or has yet to happen *to them* as writers) and recognize themselves as writers and understand the rhetorical choices that they make. In their narratives, they often discuss literacy as fluid practice—reflecting on the shifts writers must make to communicate ideas clearly to a particular audience—and discuss the importance of contexts, genres, rhetorical constructs, and the social conditions of the writing “moment.”

By writing self-reflectively about their literacy practices in narratives, students may: 1) identify and reflect on their roles and responsibilities as writers—a sense of ethos; 2) develop understanding of their literacy in flux and a sense of agency as writers; and 3) develop awareness of their “literacy in action”—the ways that their writing can effect change in their communities—a sense of civic literacy. Before I illustrate my pedagogy, I will discuss recent definitions of literacy and literacy narratives that have influenced my pedagogy. Also, I want to discuss briefly some ways in which literacy narratives have been used by composition researchers and their pedagogies. Yet, the main thrust of my essay will focus on what my students’ voices in their reflective writing have suggested about their literacy experiences. Indeed, exploring writers’ literacy narratives can expand both students’ and the field’s conversations about literacy, teaching practices, and the ways to theorize about reflective writing.

II. Definitions of Literacy and Literacy Narrative

Before going any further, I want to offer some definitions of “literacy” and “literacy narrative.” By literacy I mean socially-constructed, context-dependent, language-making practices including reading and writing. My definition is influenced by literacy scholars such as Deborah Brandt, Janet Eldred, Peter Mortenson, Mary Soliday, and David Bleich, who, in similar ways suggest that language, language use, and literacy are fluid, socially-informed systems that are dependent on rhetorical choices, historical circumstances, individuals’ lived experiences, and particular situations for writing. Brandt claims that studies of literacy should focus on context-based language making and local histories that shape writers’ everyday writing practices. She argues, “literacy is always in flux. Learning to read and write necessitates an engagement with this flux, with the layers of literacy’s past, present, and future embodied in the social relationships we have with people who taught us to read and write” (“Accumulating,” 666). Along these lines, it makes sense that students’ literacy narratives encourage writers to recognize the potential for change in their literacy development. Also, such reflective writing helps students question previous ways of thinking about their literacy as a static event, or “a time when I became literate.” Instead, writers develop an awareness of their “literacies” in flux, literacy as knowledge-making practices, and literacy linked to change in their lives and their communities.

Finally, to explain my definitions of literacy and literacy learning, I draw from parts of Brandt’s definition that “literacy has become more and more defined as the ability to position and reposition oneself amidst literacy’s recessive and emergent forms” (“Accumulating,” 666). Brandt’s definition, I think, speaks to the ways that students must learn to position themselves in the emerging or fading discourse communities that they encounter (work, the streets, school, public life); these encounters and actions become part of their literacy narratives. Brandt’s point about individuals learning to make shifts among various discourse communities, and David Bleich’s theories of genre and language, influence the design of my writing pedagogy, as well as my definition of literacy.

I define a literacy narrative as an account of one’s experiences with language and writing in specific contexts, and I see literacy narratives as flexible genres, as fluid and changing as the discourses that inform them. Literacy narratives, I suggest, provide writers with a lens through which they may examine their literacy experiences as critical acts of inquiry. In literacy narratives, writers may be self-reflective and critical of their roles and responsibilities as writers, their writing strategies, and their interactions with generic forms, as they (re)position themselves in the discourses of different genres. Finally, as writers develop a sense of narrative agency by writing literacy narratives, they become participants in the development of their literacy in action. Potentially, as critical agents, writers may be encouraged to write their voices into communities beyond classrooms, and write their ideas into action.

To get students to think about their literacy in flux, I ask them to write several self-reflective literacy narratives that accompany each of the genre-based writing projects for the course. I ask them to write about these genres, the rhetorical situation, audience, and their attitudes about literacy in each scenario. Also, I ask students to think about their roles as writers, their rhetorical choices, and the forces that may foster or impede their literacy learning in each writing situation. As a result, students begin to think about ways to write their ideas into action and to envision

themselves as writers who can promote change through writing. As I read these narratives, I look for the ways that narratives interact with or compete with the other generic forms, and the ways students position themselves in the “emerging or fading discourses” of those genres. An examination of students’ *continuous* reflections in their literacy narratives reveals insightful commentary about their experiences with literacy and insights about their literacy practices. Their observations, writing practices, and voices influence the ways we study literacy and teach composition.

III. Approaches to Teaching Literacy Narratives

Some discussions about the teaching of student-produced literacy narratives raise questions about authorship and authority. For instance, as J. Scott Blake points out, some writing pedagogies emphasize reading and interpretation of “professional literacy narratives,” which he calls the “literacy narrative cannon” (108), suggesting that these simply reproduce prescriptive and determined responses and writing about literacy. Other writing pedagogies have combined reading and analysis of professionally written literacy narratives with student-written literacy narratives—the former, it can be argued, serving as “models” of literacy narratives for students to recreate. And other examples ask writers to produce a single literacy narrative (usually at the start of the semester) that represents their personal experience with literacy. For instance, Stuart Greene’s 1995 case study research explores literacy autobiographies as they relate to issues of cultural literacy, authorship, and student writing. Greene concludes that student-written literacy autobiographies are “subtexts” that show instructors ways that students identify the significance of and take a position on issues of cultural literacy. Greene studied writers who were asked to produce a single literacy autobiography in conjunction with one argumentative research writing assignment; from this research he draws conclusions about students’ concepts of authorship and cultural literacy. However, it is questionable whether or not one static experience with literacy narrative production helps students to think about the ways in which literacy is rhetorically contingent. Rather, students in my writing courses produce literacy narratives *continuously* as they encounter different genres of and contexts for writing on a variety of self-chosen topics. This strategy, I would suggest, encourages students to move beyond the literacy myths and to think about literacy as a fluid concept.

Emphasis on the concepts of literacy and change is apparent in Mary Soliday’s “Translating Self and Difference through Literacy Narratives,” in which students read professionally written narratives as a framework for reflecting on linguistic and cultural translation (512). Soliday sees literacy narratives as “sites of translation” in which students challenge dominant discourses of culture, cross cultural borders, and negotiate different language worlds without giving up perceptions of themselves as writers and knowledge-makers (511-512). While I agree with Soliday that it is important for students to learn to navigate their ways among different discourse communities without losing their voices, the lack of emphasis on *student-written* literacy narratives in a course that asks *students* to challenge dominant discourses seems to further privilege canonical voices and preserve static versions of literacy. Instead, I ask writers in my courses to produce literacy narratives that are meta-analyses of students’ literacy events throughout the semester. They write about these particular “literacy events” as they encounter unfamiliar genres of writing (some academic writing assignments, research reports, for instance) in which their voices can potentially get lost. These student-produced literacy narratives, I think, offer both composition instructors and students opportunities to understand students’ perceptions

of themselves *as writers*, their rhetorical choices, and their ideas about literacy in action. Furthermore, I contend that discourse analysis of students' literacy narratives may offer writing instructors and their students some insights about the ways in which they "talk" about the power of language and writing to effect change in their lives and the lives of others, as they develop an awareness of civic literacy.

Critics of student-written literacy narratives often label them as "conversion narratives," and are skeptical of the "success stories" produced in students' literacy narratives. Jane Greer's essay points out that such conversion rhetoric in students' narratives often aims at pleasing the instructor. Greer also suggests that asking students to write specifically about cultural literacy issues is itself a form of exclusion of students' voices, a repressive pedagogical practice similar to those that students have encountered in their past schooling experiences. However, not all literacy narrative pedagogies focus on writing about cultural literacy issues nor do they enforce a formulaic structure for writing in this genre. It seems hasty on the parts of critics who imply students' reflections on their literacy experiences lead them to become mired in a particular historical narrative or force them to adopt a potentially repressive discourse. Such implications seem to dismiss the potential of literacy narrative pedagogies and discount the importance of student-produced reflective narratives as writing which offers new perspectives about literacy.

In his article on his own literacy narrative pedagogy, J. Scott Blake focuses on student-written literacy narratives which ask students to build a self-reflexive language, a "production pedagogy" he claims validates students' authorial voice (113). In line with Blake's approach, I'd like to consider what can be learned about students' literacy experiences by listening to their voices in literacy narratives as they encounter a variety of genres and contexts in their experiences as writers.

IV. Listening to Students' Voices in Literacy Narratives: Towards Awareness, Agency, and Action

In literacy narratives, there exists a meta-text that suggests developing literacy awareness. The emergence of such awareness is exemplified in "literacy moments"—points of friction in which writers' past experiences clash with present ones about literacy. Literacy narratives reveal these points of contention. In their narratives, students identify themselves *as writers* and reflect on their roles and responsibilities; develop an understanding of literacy in flux and a sense of critical agency in their literacy development; and finally, develop awareness of the potential for their writing to enact change—a "literacy in action." The following excerpts are taken from students' literacy narratives in a writing course that I taught at Eastern Connecticut State University in fall 1998. A sample of the literacy narrative assignment appears in Appendix A.

a. Awareness of Roles and Responsibilities

In their literacy narratives, students display an awareness of their roles and responsibilities and identify themselves in various ways as writers. They use language that shows awareness of their changing "writerly" roles as they encounter a variety of rhetorical situations and address new purposes for writing. Writers also reflect on their responsibilities to audiences and their ethical concerns for appearing credible to their audiences. For example, Elizabeth reflects on her letter to the editor of the Hartford Courant based on an event in which she witnessed verbal child abuse

in a supermarket parking lot. In her literacy narrative, she writes about her desire to appear fair as a writer to the audiences that she anticipates will read her letter. Elizabeth writes

It was a big worry of mine . . . that I would be isolating the people who occasionally lost their temper with their child in public and yelled at them. I wanted to make it clear [in my letter] that this was a situation where most people would've been appalled, and that I can distinguish between a frustrated parent and an abusive one. To these people, the thought of a twenty-one-year-old whistle blower running around in a supermarket parking lot taking down license plate numbers and calling DCF is probably horrible . . . However, I have confidence that the innocent people know who they are. I believe that those same people, out of reverence to their roles as parents, will rally around this cause. Now, I knew I would be definitely breaching the comfort zones of people who were truly guilty, and that was my intent.

Elizabeth's excerpt shows her concern for representing herself as a credible writer, and she displays an understanding of ethos in her narrative. Rather than attacking her audience members who may disagree with her definitions of child abuse, she reflects on how she must make distinctions between abuse and discipline to avoid alienating some readers. Finally, her intentions as a writer of a persuasive public letter are made clear. She wants readers to "rally" around her letter and take action as she did; to speak out when witnessing such situations of abuse; and to encourage potential abusers to contemplate their actions in the future. Elizabeth's narrative reveals her awareness of her role as a writer of a public letter, her position on the issue at stake, her need to address differing views, and her responsibilities to her audience.

In the next part of her narrative, Elizabeth discusses her role motivations as a writer, as someone who wants to call her audience to action. She comments on her awareness of responsibility as a writer to examine her language choices in order to persuade readers to act on the problem she is addressing. Elizabeth explains

My intended audience is the people who might be moved to fulfill their civic duty to report child abuse in the future. Sure I wanted to shame the offenders, but mainly I wanted to motivate the 'bystanders.' I contemplated throwing in a little Dante, 'The deepest trenches of hell are reserved for those, who in times of struggle, choose to remain neutral,' but that would be way too preachy. Instead, I included [in my letter] that others had witnessed the event, but hadn't done anything. This was good because I tried to evoke a 'shame on us' feeling from my audience, without directly saying so.

Elizabeth's narrative explains her awareness of the rhetorical shifts that she, a public letter writer, must make as she enters different discourse communities; her decision to omit the Dante reference is based on an awareness of pathos. Finally, her call to readers to take action and her desire to motivate her audience to "fulfill their civic duty," as she sees it, shows that she recognizes that her writing has the power to evoke action if she is careful about her language choices. Indeed, Elizabeth identifies herself as writer in the public sphere and shows an understanding that her role and purpose as a writer depends on the social situation which has called her to write.

In his literacy narrative, Mark emphasizes his awareness of his role as a writer of anarchist rhetoric, a position from which he usually speaks. However, in his literacy narrative about his letter to the Hartford Courant, he also recognizes the need to reconsider how he will present himself and adjust his writing style to persuade his audience who may not share his political convictions. Mark writes

Literacy narratives allow me to examine and change my style of writing depending on the project . . . When doing the first project, which involved writing a letter to the editor of the Hartford Courant, I was mainly writing based on how I had always written, in an angry manner and from my usual anarchist perspective. This has always worked pretty well in my anarchist ‘zine, Us Against Them, and I didn’t see why I couldn’t apply it to my class projects. However, after peer reviews and the literacy narrative, I realized that it’s not always best to go for the ‘all or nothing’ approach of angry, exclamatory writing which leaves you with few supporters and “preaching to the converted.”

Mark’s reflection focuses on his awareness of his role as a writer for an audience with political affiliations that are different from his own; the anarchist ‘zine he usually writes for accepts his exclamatory language while the Courant audience may not. He continues

Since the anarchist movement has always been small and isolated, doesn’t it make sense that in order to get our ideas out to more people we’ll need to how it can affect them? All this talk about the evils of capitalism won’t bother someone who’s benefiting from it, nor will it affect those who could care less. Literacy narratives help me to find other ways of using language and expressing my opinion to those who might not necessarily buy into the typical anarchist rhetoric.

Mark’s narrative reveals his awareness of the changing roles and responsibilities that writers must assume and the importance of making careful language choices for particular audiences. He is also aware of the changes in his own voice as a writer in different writing situations. In his reflective writing, Mark demonstrates to readers of his narratives his ethical responsibilities to himself, his ideological beliefs, and to his audience; he remains loyal to his intentions and political beliefs but considers other ways to present himself to his audience. As Mark explains, literacy narratives give him a space to negotiate his multiple roles as a writer.

Literacy narratives encourage writers to develop an awareness of the flexibility of their roles; as writers, they are not defined by the static “labels” that may have been previously assigned to them. Also, through critical reflection of their roles as writers, students develop an awareness of the rhetorical choices they make as they position themselves in unfamiliar discourse communities. In this way, writers are encouraged to broaden their definitions of literacy and their visions of themselves as writers, to look beyond these literacy myths. These are their literacy moment.

b. Literacy in Flux and Agency

In their literacy narratives, students often reject the concept of literacy as a static construct, a set of skills to be acquired, and embrace their choices as agents in their literacy development. To understand literacy as a fluid concept—literacy in flux—writers must be aware of the choices

they make and their agency as writers. Literacy scholar Jay Robinson defines human agency as opportunities in which individuals can become critical about their presence in the world, create voices to be heard, and develop a sense of authority from which to speak for themselves (108). Literacy narratives provide writers with such a space. In the excerpts below, writers see themselves as critical agents who shape their literacy practices and move beyond the myth of literacy as a set of acquirable skills.

For example, Mark's final literacy narrative, a "macronarrative" written at the end of the course about his writing experiences with the literacy narrative genre, suggests the sense of flexibility, change, and control that he notices in his writing. Drawing on the work of Soliday Mark writes

When Mary Soliday suggests that literacy narratives are empowering, I agree totally . . . As a writer of radical literature and propaganda, I now ask myself questions as I write that before I never would have considered at all. In the end, I am much happier with the finished project, and I am even more secure that others will be able to see the writing in the way that I do. Funny thing, I never thought writing about my writing could be useful for anything. Literacy narrative writing lets me examine how I view my writing. I guess you could say that my points come across a little better now. Besides, if I can't understand my own writing process, how will anyone understand what I am trying to get across?

He suggests that reflective writing about writing offers him new opportunities to envision wider audiences and their potential reception of his ideas. No matter how "radical" his message, he feels more confident in the persuasiveness of his writing, his choices, and his ability to question writing practices in his literacy narratives. Mark suggests his understanding of language as a fluid construction, literacy in flux. He discusses the flexibility of his literacy practices and expresses a sense of power, or gaining control over his writing.

Similarly, Elizabeth reflects on her changes in literacy practices, her literacy in flux, and perceptions of her developing agency. In her final narrative, she suggests that for her the idea of literacy in flux provides a new "label" with which she chooses to identify herself.

If I were to write a literacy narrative about my overall progress for the semester, I would consider myself a second rough draft. I would say that I'm much improved but in need of continuous revisions. I still have plenty of kinks to work out in my writing. I have had my work over the semester described as "grossly overstated." Yet, in another peer evaluation, my writing was described as "insightful, sensitive to the audience reaction." I have seen all of these things and more in my own work. I have a long way to go but now I feel much better armed.

For Elizabeth, reflecting on her writing reveals to her the diverse processes with which she approaches writing, suggesting her understanding of literacy is a continual process; as her reflections reveal, she has developed a sense of agency in her writing.

In his narrative, Kurt's complaint about the restrictions that academic discourse (or at least his understanding of "academic discourse") is that it limits *his* voice and *his* ideas from being heard by the audience. In other words, his narrative suggests that who he is and his presence in his

writing are dismissed by his sense of urgency to create an “academic” tone. Kurt suggests that academic prose writing obscures the writer’s “real” voice, and notes the difference he observes when writing reflectively about his writing.

When I’m writing a literacy narrative, I can express any thought I wish. Any state of mind. Obviously, targeting the correct audience in the correct manner is an important part of academic writing. Unfortunately, this means the freedom of composing in your own tone is revoked. I don’t like that, you are no longer you, you are a mode of transport for expressing various facts, figures, and googely-goop, previously conceived by some smart guy long before you. It’s not fun . . . If you don’t like what you are writing, how much effort are you going to put into it? It’s precisely why most professors who require research paper after research paper get big loads of horse manure back from their students. You may encounter a tremendous amount of ideas and feelings while you go through your writing process, but you have to repress them . . . don’t commit a logical fallacy or something . . .

Distanced from his writing in academic discourse, Kurt claims to be an observer of, rather than a participant in his own literacy experience. Instead, his comments on writing literacy narratives reveal his awareness of a change in language and his “voice.” In fact, Kurt’s comments on “real voice” are exemplified in his narrative.

. . . But heck, in a literacy narrative, you can have all the freakin’ logical fallacies you want. It’s your podium, your pen, your keyboard—go ahead, get your swerve on. Do it up. Express yourself—go ahead—“vogue”—let your fingers go with the flow. Literacy narratives allow writers to explore and develop who they really are as writers.

For Kurt, narratives offer him a space to explore his voice and ideas in a nonrestrictive style. He imagines possibilities for re-thinking the definitions of literacy; rather than a fixed bunch of skills he must absorb in order to “become literate,” he re-conceptualizes literacy learning as flexible. He values the ways narratives allow writers, especially ones who may struggle losing their voices in academic writing, to change their static definitions of literacy; yet he also expresses an awareness of the audience, language and tone in academic discourse.

To challenge the myth of literacy as fixed or a static body of knowledge to be acquired, self-reflective writing broadens writers’ definitions of literacy and literacy learning. Writers see their “literacy in flux,” and they show awareness of their continual literacy practices. Further, they seem to develop a sense of agency about their literacy development. They identify a sense of control over their literacy practices and attempt new writing strategies other than habitual ones, all of which suggests awareness agency.

c. Literacy in Action

Throughout their reflection and critique in literacy narratives, writers view themselves as active participants in shaping their literacy practices. As they envision themselves as participants in their critical literacy development, writers create opportunities for their writing to elicit responses from real-world audiences and to produce change in their communities. Writers’ literacy narratives reveal the ways in which they are encouraged to write their voices into public

contexts, to produce action-oriented writing, and to initiate changes in their worlds through their writing.

In their literacy narrative writing, writers realize the potential that their writing has to initiate changes in their communities. For instance, Sam's literacy narrative about his letter to the editor includes the possibilities that he sees for his writing to evoke action among his readers to support a change in a policy that prohibits mountain biking in his local woods. In his narrative, he remarks on the potential for his letter to make others rethink this policy and to motivate them to support a policy change that would be fair to everyone who uses the trails.

In writing the editorial, . . . I chose something closer to home that affected me. The issue is that mountain biking is not allowed on the local trails in Canfield/Essex Woods by my house. This is an inconvenience to me, and I also feel that the people (hikers), who like to remind me that biking isn't allowed there, treat it like their own private playground. I wanted [in my letter] to try to convince the people involved that what they have heard about what mountain biking does to the trails is true. Also, I wanted raise the idea that they don't have a very open-minded approach to the issue. Judging by hikers' attitudes on the trails, they would be quick to disagree. . . . More recently, after getting stopped several times, I decided to maybe take a different approach and write a letter that will be read not only by the Nature Conservancy people, but by other bikers who read the Essex newspaper. Hopefully they will join the "crusade" as well.

Sam's reflective writing describes his purpose—to change people's attitudes through his public letter writing. But he also identifies a public forum and audiences for his writing that he believes may initiate some action in the situation that has reached an impasse. Lastly, he is hopeful that others will feel inspired to take action to change the biking policy after reading his letter in the local newspaper.

Further along, Sam observes the connection between his agency as a writer and his desire to further participate in the development of his literacy. Because of his letter's publication in the town paper, Sam was inspired further to write his ideas into action on this issue.

The fact that my editorial got published made me choose to do a proposal about possible solutions to the problem, in case there was a town meeting or some other type of debate over it [the no-biking policy]. However, realistically, I wouldn't put the flyers of my proposal all over the place like the PETA people do. I think the proposal would be more appropriate for a town meeting concerning the situation, so I could give out the proposal to people directly involved: hikers, bikers, the Nature Conservancy who keep up the park, and the others who use our town's services and are concerned taxpayers.

Sam's "success" in having his letter read and published in the local paper encourages him to see connections in his literacy in action and to write another action-oriented document—a proposal—to change the biking policy. In his reflection, he writes about the ways his writing has already been received (the publication of his letter), his potential to elicit additional responses from other readers, and his ability to produce change in his community with his writing—Sam's literacy in action.

Literacy in action is based on those literacy moments, moments that can be read in literacy narratives, when writers recognize their potential as writers to evoke change and to write for contexts beyond the classroom and in the public sphere. In these contexts, writers' voices and participation as literate citizens may contribute to actions in their communities. Rather than seeing their writing as having finite limitations, for these writers, literacy has greater potential. Literacy is re-conceptualized for its possibilities. And, writers may envision themselves as literate citizens, participating actively and equally in their communities through their literacy actions.

V. Emergence of a "Civic Literacy"

In Conversations on the Written Word, Jay Robinson explains that for teachers to understand the ways in which literacy develops among students, they should look to "particular cultures of particular classrooms as these are shaped by personal and institutional histories and as they take shape to anticipate . . . possible worlds" (7), and make students aware of these "cultures." Three concepts are critical to Robinson's ideas for promoting ideas of civic literacy in teaching writing: 1) "habitable space," spaces where communities might begin conversations, opportunities arise, and meaning is negotiated about how literacy can thrive; 2) "human agency," opportunities which ask students "to become critical about their presences" in the world and to create a voice, the authority to speak for themselves; and 3) the ability of students to envision themselves as actively participating and contributing to their communities, cases in which they recognize that "words have some potential for changing worlds" (Robinson, "Literacy and Lived Lives," 13-14). Based on just a few of the excerpts from my students' narratives, Robinson's ideas about civic literacy begin to emerge. Students discuss concerns about their critical agency as writers, and they use language that often questions static definitions of literacy. Students write about the ways narratives provide them with spaces to think about audiences, their responsibilities as writers, and the ethical dimensions of writing. The "messy language of narrative" offers students spaces to tell their own and reflect on others' literacy stories, to question their practices, and to move towards a literacy in action—to use writing to effect changes in their worlds.

To encourage a civic literacy among writers, and to broaden conversations about literacy as well, students in composition courses must be given opportunities to practice complex rhetorical analysis, engage in critical literacy practices, and locate forums for their writing which will invite responses from real-world audiences. Literacy narratives, I suggest, provide a space for writers to examine their literacy experiences as critical acts of inquiry. Instead of viewing literacy learning as a body of knowledge "out there" to be acquired from "experts," or simply the acquisition of grammar rules, students begin to think of the literacy as fluid and changing and about complex rhetorical strategies. Often, literacy narratives reveal the ways in which writers identify and wrestle with the literacy myths they have accumulated. But these narratives also show the ways writers envision the potential and possibility for their literacy development—ways to move beyond those myths. In fact, in students' narratives, they use language to describe themselves as active participants in their *continuous* literacy development. Potentially, seeing themselves as critical agents, writers develop an awareness of strategies for writing their voices into communities beyond their classrooms. The language of their literacy narratives reveals awareness of a "civic literacy." Students see ways in which their writing itself is literacy in

action; the ways they can motivate others through writing to take action; and the ways their writing can effect real changes in their communities.

For composition instructors, students' literacy narratives inform us about the writers we work with, their previous literacy experiences, and some immediate concerns they have about their writing and reading practices. Certainly, instructors may better understand writers' struggles after reading students' literacy stories, ones that often remain unheard. But perhaps more importantly, including student-written narratives in our pedagogies shows that we privilege these narratives as genres of possibility—narratives that provide writers and instructors with a rich understanding of literacy in flux and complicate our discussions about literacy and writing. Finally, if we continuously ask students to reflect on their writing as they encounter new genres, contexts or occasions for writing, we show that we value students' self-reflective writing and the ways it contributes to our conversations on literacy and changes the ways we teach writing.

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Appendix A: Sample Literacy Narrative Assignment

Literacy Narrative for Project #1: Public Letters

Write a literacy narrative in which you reflect on your experiences as a writer of public letters. Describe the ways that writing a public letter affects your understanding of literacy. Reflect on your experiences writing in this genre and writing for “a public” audience. Analyze how you planned and composed your public letter – either a letter to the editor or to a public official.

A potential audience for your literacy narrative may include other writers of public letters, students in composition courses who are assigned public letters, or the writers in this course who will comment on your narratives. They’ll probably expect you to describe your writing process. And, they may expect that you’ll discuss any effects you tried to achieve while writing the letter; problems you encountered and addressed; and whether or not you are satisfied with the letter. What parts of your writing experience would be helpful to them as writers?

Use lots of examples in your literacy narratives.

In your narrative, consider some of the following:

- How did you choose your topic? What influenced your choices?
- What was the situation or occasion that surrounded your writing event?
- What was your purpose for writing? Did it change as you developed your argument?
- What strategies did you use to present yourself to your readers?
- How did you decide on the audience for your letter?
- How did you consider the audience’s differing views or their knowledge of the topic?
- Did you consider the audience’s reaction or the consequences of your letter?
- What drafting and revising strategies were helpful to you as you wrote the letter?
- What did you learn about yourself as a writer or your writing process after writing the public letter?
- Discuss any effects you tried to achieve while writing the letter, problems that you encountered and addressed, and whether or not you are satisfied with your letter.