

This is a transcript of the video clip "Selfe Interview: Part 1" from the interview with Dr. Cynthia Selfe in Samuel Head, "A Scholarly Legacy: Professor Cynthia Selfe and the Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives" published in *Kairos: Rhetoric, Technology, Pedagogy*, 22(1), available at <http://kairos.technorhetoric.net/22.1/interviews/head>.

Sam:

Do you mind introducing yourself?

Dr. Selfe:

No, I'm Cynthia Selfe and I'm Distinguished Humanities Professor in the Department of English at Ohio State University.

Sam:

Thank you, and thank you for being willing to participate in this interview. To start off, would you mind telling me a little bit about your background and how you got interested composition, literacy, and digital studies?

Dr. Selfe:

Yes, when I left the University of Wisconsin, I was, as an undergraduate student, I thought it was going to be an English teacher in public schools, and so I went to Scotland and I did a little bit of teaching there in a coal mining district.

And then when I came back to the United States I had forgotten to look for a job. So I went out, I lived in Houston at the time and I went to all the school districts around Houston, but this was in August, late August, and there were no jobs to be had, you know. They had all filled their jobs except for one school district, and that was North Woods, right? And they were so happy to have me that I should have understood what the situation was. That was an all-black school district, and the poorest school district in the entire area, and the only one that Houston hadn't annexed because the tax base was so low. So I got a job at the very best school for me because it gave me a chance to learn with populations that I had never even imagined teaching and never understood how much I could learn from working with. And that was where I got my first job.

So I taught at North Woods Junior High for three years. And it taught me so much that I understood by the end of that that I needed to go back to graduate school and learn more about teaching, that I was woefully prepared. Not that the University of Wisconsin had tried to prepare me poorly, but they prepared me to teach in nice white middle-class schools.

And I knew that I wanted to teach at schools that were very different, and so I needed to go back to the University of Texas and learn how to do this, learn what I could bring. And so I went back to the University of Texas and started my studies and English education. And my application was so pathetic to the University of Texas that they didn't accept me. And then the day before classes were to start, a woman had to drop out, one of the TAs had to drop out because she was pregnant. And I was the first person they called you could come.

So I went to Austin. I started studying, and it was a golden time because of at that particular moment, at the University of Texas, Jim Kinneavy was there, John Ruskiewicz, Maxine Hairston, Steve Witty, Lester Faigley came, a whole host of people that specialized in rhetoric and composition and brought a very broad and extensive imagination to the field and help shape the field in those early days of, you know, the late 70s going into the 80s.

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And so while I was at the University of Texas, when it came time to write my dissertation, I didn't have enough money to pay a typist. And in those days you would pay a typist. You'd write your dissertation out longhand and you pay a typist to type it up, and they had to use like five or six different layers of carbon paper. And then if they made a mistake, every letter that they made a mistake, they had to scratch off with a razor blade and retype it. It was a very laborious process, and I didn't have the money to do it, I wasn't good enough typist myself. So one of my friends at the time was Hugh Burns, who is known as, in our profession, as one of the pioneers of computing in English Studies. and Hugh knew how to use the mainframe computer at the University of Texas. And he thought, and I thought after he told me about this, that I could type it on the main frame, and then get the printout, and then we could revise or I could revise using the computer, and get a cleaner printout until the whole dissertation was done and fairly clean. And that's how I started using computers. And because so few people in those days, this was 1979-80, used computers, that particular experience made me an absolute expert in English Studies, and from then on that was the area I chose to work in.

Sam:

So tell me a story about a personal literacy experience and maybe one that's impacted your view of literacy.

Dr. Selfe:

Well I've told many stories for the DALN. I told stories about learning how to read, reading cereal boxes, and singing songs that my mother taught me. But the most recent experience with the literacy that has opened my eyes to how difficult and complex the endeavor can be, has been learning the ukulele. And it's an instrument that I just took up a couple of years ago, and I've been in several small clubs learning how to play, and learning how to read music and musical notation, and how to formulate chords. And it has opened my eyes to both the discipline that's required and the practice that's required to become better at this effort of reading a symbolic system and communicating what that symbolic system conveys, composing, in other words, but also how attitude has to figure into that process. If it weren't for the fact that I really enjoyed learning how to play the ukulele, that I took some delight in it, some pleasure, I don't think I would be able to go through the discipline of learning how to play. So that reminds me of just how similar that particular process is and that complex of factors is for people who are learning to read and compose alphabetically.

Sam:

So, what would you say is your definition of literacy?

Dr. Selfe:

Well, my definition of literacy is the activities, the events, the understandings, the values, the experiences that are associated with reading and composing using shared symbolic systems, either mathematical notation, musical

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notation, alphabetic notation, so using all of those systems or any of those systems. But also understanding that the practices and the values of literacy, because values are a part of literacy, are shaped by the cultural context, the historical context, your economic context, your linguistic context, the geographical location, your geographical location in the world. And that literacy varies widely, those experiences, those understandings, those values, those practices, those events, they all vary widely depending on the context within which their practiced. So I don't see literacy as one thing, but I see it as a whole complex of factors and events and practices and values that surround reading and composing in different systems.

Sam:

So would you say that you have a metaphor that guides you or gives you direction in this view of literacy?

Dr. Selfe:

To me, literacy is not a thing but it's, I would liken it to the Particle, Wave, and Field Theory, that is, you can have a literacy practice that's a particle, an event that's a particle, but that event or those practices change over time and place so it's a field. And then finally the practices and experiences and values happen in a context so it's also a field, literacy is a is a field, a context. So to me, literacy is both a particle, a wave, and a field, and in that not bounded by one time or one place or one context.

Sam:

So as you teach your students about literacy, and as you have them go and interview people about literacy, you often ask your students to invite people to "tell a story." What do you feel is the significance of personal narratives in regards to literacy?

Dr. Selfe:

Yeah well, you know, a personal narrative is sometimes the most natural way or genre for communicating. Right? And it's not that I think that that genre that we all do of telling his story has any capital "T" truth value, but when you tell a story, it is just laden and laced and sedimented with personal understandings of what literacy is, what the expectations for literacy are, what your values surrounding literacy are, what your economic class, gender, considerations, familial expectations are. All these things are layered into stories. They're just there, they're part of the fabric of the story. So you can get such perspectival glimpses into people's literate lives through the telling of stories, that it provides a marvelous lens through which we can discern some of the personal experiences and values and understandings of literacy, not always directly, but sometimes indirectly.

Sam:

Why do you feel like literacy is important, and why should we be studying it as a field?

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Dr. Selfe:

Well, I mean it's what makes us different, it's what makes us human, and it is the activity and understanding that makes us that ties us one person to another person. So it's the -- literacy is a way of staying in touch, and sharing what we know, being human. And for that reason alone I think it's well worth studying.