What do you see as the broader implications of this project?

Ulman: Enough time hasn't passed to assess whether people are looking at it through an historical lens, but I think the other piece of it that we are really only beginning to realize is this notion of whether communities outside of the academic community will look to it as a public history or broader cultural resource. I don't know the answer to that, what we hoped would happen and I think has begun to happen, particularly with our colleagues at other universities, maybe more so than anywhere else, is that people would tell us what the DALN was for.

Selfe: …which we consider a sign of success.

Ulman: You know build something that has this capacity for…and this is a made-up example but one that I often think about just as a sort of test case for my thinking about this. If some extended family wanted to collect literacy narratives or encourage every living member of that family to record and archive a literacy narrative simply so they could consult those every 10 years, or 25 years, or 50 years to celebrate their family and its history, that would be fine with us. I don't know that anybody has done anything quite that independent of us.

Selfe: But we have found that schools for instance have, the University of Illinois and the University of Arkansas at Little Rock have both used the DALN, for instance, as part of their National Writing Project, so teachers who come to those schools often give a literacy narrative and contribute those to the DALN as part of the writing project. Other schools, here at OSU and at other places we've had teachers who are pre-service teachers reflecting on their development as literate individuals and putting their narratives in the DALN. We've had young people who have just finished their GED degree contributing their narratives to the DALN just as way of celebrating on graduation day and marking that as an important point in their lives, contributing their narrative and talking about their degree and how they have accomplished their degree and making that available to relatives and people who they want to share that with.

Ulman: Little Rock has invited faculty, staff, and students to contribute narratives and they have over 140 over a couple of years so they're developing this fascinating record of a diverse group of people with a common characteristic and that is they've worked or studied or taught at that campus. That I think is one of the possibilities of the DALN is to build those kinds of collections…

Selfe: …around those kinds of interests. And there have been schools where writing centers have decided to collect these. There have been schools that have collected them as a departmental effort to preserve the stories of faculty or students. There have been efforts to do this kind of narrative collection as a way of collecting the stories of students who are rising seniors coming into the university and then using those narratives to provide some instruction for new G-TAs who might never have been in a first-year composition class but who are faced with teaching that kind-of class in a university setting. So there's a thousand different reasons of how people could and do use these narratives. We don't know all of them and we do depend on other people to tell us how the DALN might be used.

Ulman: One example, this is kind-of a blended purpose because I'm a member of this group but in my capacity as a volunteer naturalist in the Metro Parks here, I've been trying to work with my fellow volunteers and naturalists in the system to record a series of "Reading the Landscape" narratives that both touch on traditional literacy because I ask them, "how do printed texts, like field guides, or non-fiction nature writing or academic writing help you learn to read a landscape and then how do you in the field read that landscape?" And my pitch to them was not doing research on them but that it would be a resource for training new naturalists or volunteers, it would be a way of outreach to the community because they get to know those people in a different way if they are telling personal stories, but as with anything people also put it to their own uses. So one that I helped somebody record a couple of weeks ago, I saw him out at the park maybe a couple of weeks later and he said, "Well, my mom approved of it so I think it was okay." So just by sharing it, it becomes a personal record. Contributors use it in that way too, and so that I think gets at one of your questions here about— Why open it up? Why make it public? Part of that is to let other people tell us what the value of doing that is.

Selfe: One of the things you ask in that question I think was what are the larger implications? I would say another large implication is that we think that the DALN is right now the largest, publicly available online repository of literacy narratives in the world. And, because it's open to everybody for their use, all those literacy narratives are available for graduate students, for instance, to use according to the way in which each piece is licensed in the DALN. I think that is a huge, huge contribution to the field because there are students in composition, in literacy studies, in linguistics and there are faculty in all those areas that could use this material to learn more about literacy and language use and reading and composing practices and values in our culture and in other cultures.

Ulman: And it's redefining, I think, in ways that we're still coming to understand – the notion of an archive. A colleague in geography, hearing about the project said, "you, know I'm teaching this research methods course," and she does more qualitative work than quantitative, though she's in a department where quantitative and qualitative methods coexist side by side, and lots of people will do both kinds of research, but she had the impression that students in her field thought of archives as primarily, as government archives of quantitative data, demographic data. She wanted to introduce them to a different notion of an archive, an archive of materials that's created rather than say recorded through some formal process of government transactions, let's say, and it's more personal and narrative, so that's interesting.

Selfe: And also it's structured in a different way, one of the things that we talk a lot about the DALN, it is structured by people who contribute their stories, so it's a folksonomy which means that individuals tag their stories with the information that they would like attached, not the information we would like attached, so there's all sorts of vocabulary attached to the infrastructure, or…the metadata, there's all sorts of metadata attached to these narratives and this metadata itself is information about how people thought about literacy at a particular time in a particular place, what they wanted to share, how they named parts of their identity.

Ulman: And that's another implication of the project in terms of what an archive can be, you know, archives to the degree that people imagine them as very official and systematic collections…

Selfe: Controlled by a single person.

Ulman: Right, and that lends them a certain kind-of value and strength and there's nothing wrong with that but we made a choice when we were dealing with the fact that yes, this was a database; I mean it is, it's an online database, but of narratives. But it also has associated with it a bunch of data fields each of which has to be there, even if it's blank and we chose when we were developing what's called a metadata application profile where you say, okay what pieces of information will be associated with each literacy narrative and then is it going to be required? Is it going to be optional? Are you going to have a controlled vocabulary? And for everything we said, we don't want to control the vocabulary, we don't want to get into that business. It's been so fascinating to look at for instance, in the gender field, you can imagine us putting something like check boxes for male, female, and maybe transgender, or maybe other and have a text box. We don't have anything like that we just say if you would like to self-identify – tell us how.

Selfe: So we have woman, we have female, we have trans…

Ulman: 29 different things, at last count, which really it taught us so much about how people, the fine grained ways in which people identify.

Selfe: It's a folksonomy.

Ulman: Where would learn that if you're outside of particular communities unless people were generous enough to contribute not just the literacy narrative but that information, so that's another broad implication I think – it's to question the…again, I don't want to say that there aren't good reasons to have more structured archives and databases because there are. This is an alternative and I think it's particularly valuable and is proving its value every time we take a look at what's in there.

Selfe: Yeah, and that's why I would say another large scale implication for me is to bring home the importance of convergence culture. I'm a scholar in the academy and when I do my scholarship, usually when I did research I had to go out into the field. I had to transcribe. I had to interview. I had to record all this material, usually in print for a long while, and then I had to bring that back into the academy and I had to render it in a scholarly article. Often in doing that rendering, that recording, I flattened a lot of the information that I got in interviews or in interactions with other people. The stories in the DALN though, I can go to the DALN and I can have those stories come into my scholarly research in a whole different way, in a way that – I might not have collected them. I might not have recorded them. I might not have had anything to do with them and often I don't, but I can use them in my scholarship, so now my scholarship can't be rendered in print fully because if I were to try and represent the DALN materials I would miss all sorts of semiotic dimensions of that work, so now my scholarship has to be digital and it has to be multimodal in order to take advantage of these convergent sources of data like the DALN or information, or narratives that I want to focus on.