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Book Review

_Literacy and Learning: Reflections on Writing, Reading, and Society_  
Deborah Brandt (2009)  
San Francisco: Jossey-Bass  
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224 pages

“Why?” English and Language Arts teachers have often been asked this one-word question or some variation of it. “Why do we have to read this book?” “Why do we have to write this?” “Why is this even important for me to learn?” Although the ubiquitous _why_ will continue to be asked, after reading Dr. Deborah Brandt’s _Literacy and Learning: Reflections on Writing, Reading, and Society_ (2009) the answers English and Language Arts teachers provide may help students understand the connections between their literacy practices and broader economic and technological changes.

The book is organized around two loosely related areas of interest—sponsorship of literacy in times of economic transformation and the values placed on writing in today’s knowledge economy. A short introduction is included to orient the reader about Brandt’s research that is explained more in depth in following chapters. Both the conclusion and appendix of this text were excerpted from her previous book, _Literacy in American Lives_ (Brandt, 2001). The appendix lists the interview questions she asked her participants during her study of peoples’ memories surrounding reading and writing. The book ends with several questions to ponder spurred by Brandt’s research.

In her introduction, “Writing at the Speed of Change”, Brandt informs readers that this collection is comprised mainly of previously published writings. With this in mind, she then presents the narrative of Calvin Lockett, a railroad dispatcher during the early twentieth century who would be without work by the 1940s because of economic and technological advances that would render his occupational skillsets obsolete. It is the focus on better understanding “…how vulnerable literacy skills become as they got bound up with economic competition and technological change” (p. x) that underscores Brandt’s idea about the ways people come to acquire literacy.

In the abridged talk included in the book entitled “The Gravemeyer Award in Education: A conversation with Deborah Brandt” readers learn that Brandt was awarded the prestigious accolade in 2003 for her work focused on literacy sponsorship detailed in _Literacy in American Lives_ (2001) in which she conducted interviews with nearly 100 participants during the first half of the 1990s in seeking to uncover how people became literate and _remained_ literate. From these retellings, Brandt surmises that economic changes dictate that one’s literacy skills, too, must change in order to retain value. Termed _sponsors of literacy_, these “agents, forces, and institutions stimulated people’s literacy for their own economic or political or
cultural advantage” (p. 10) by providing access to literacy. By the same token, sponsors are able to withhold access. Brandt suggests that in these times of high-stakes testing and heightened accountability, policymakers, educators, and those concerned about literacy would do well to think about ways to hold businesses, corporate leaders and other beneficiaries of students’ literacy skills accountable to students and schools.

Chapter one, “Sponsors of Literacy”, is an excerpt that was originally published in *College Composition and Communication* and goes more in depth about sponsorship. Brandt contends that connecting literacy acquisition on the individual level with relevant economic changes occurring then provides ways to better understand how literacy comes to serve the needs of diverse stakeholders. Once again, these stakeholders can be thought of as sponsors—“agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold literacy—and gain advantage by it in some way” (p. 25). She explicates that she is not relying solely on a strict understanding of economy, which is marked by capital accumulation and monetary transactions only. Rather, she views economy as “... many spheres where people labor, invest, and exploit energies—their own and others’—to maximize advantage” (p. 45). To highlight this, Brandt includes portions of Dwayne Lowery's literacy narrative in which he discusses how his role as field staff representative for a public employees’ union was affected by the vying for power among laborers and corporations. As a union representative in the 1970s, Lowery’s literacy became nearly obsolete as the tide turned toward solving labor disputes through litigious channels instead of through arbitration. Lowery found that over time, he began to read more legal briefs and write in a similar style. Stated another way, Brandt argues that economic competition affects literacy.

Excerpted from her article published in the *Harvard Educational Review*, Chapter 2: *Literacy in American Lives: Living and Learning in a Sea of Change* provides life histories from two unrelated women who shared similar backgrounds but whose literacy afforded them drastically different opportunities. Martha Day and Barbara Hunt are both the middle of three children and grew up in small rural towns on family-owned dairy farms. They both liked to read and write for school and pleasure. However, Martha was born in 1904 and Barbara was born in 1971. Martha experienced a time when family farms were profitable, and not just monetarily. As in Martha’s case, the knowledge, experiences, and networks she gained from living on a farm would later be used as resources that afforded her professional opportunities during the 1940s when farm-living themed magazines were commercially successful. Initially, she would come to be a guest columnist who wrote articles geared towards women on the farm but would ultimately assume editorial responsibilities for a similar magazine. It is important to realize that although the literacy skills they held were similar, the change from an industrial economy to a knowledge economy over the years caused Barbara’s skills to be valued less than Martha’s skills. To that end, these two narratives further serve to substantiate Brandt’s argument that economic changes “… can inflate or deflate the value of existing forms of literacy in the lives of students” (Brandt, 2009, p. 64).

The subsequent chapter, “Accumulating Literacy: Writing and Learning to Write in the Twentieth Century,” details how access to literacy over time comes to be passed on to future generations, either in the forms of material resources or reading and writing practices and strategies. Understanding this “piling up” of literacy, as Brandt considers such accumulations, may help teachers also understand how school-based and home-based literacies come to function in tandem. She also argues that viewing literacy as a resource that can be accumulated focuses our sights on historical contexts that shape the present.
Considering subsequent chapters showcase Brandt’s recent research on the functions of writing in today’s knowledge economy this chapter helps foreground literacy as both reading and writing, not simply reading.

According to Brandt, people often have fond memories of their first encounters with reading, so much so that they remember the titles of the first book they read or that was read to them. However, it would be difficult to say the same about initial writing experiences, Brandt posits. Because reading is more often than not, “. . . a clearly demarcated activity” (p. 100), it is frequently more easy to recollect those times than it is to recall writing memories. Similarly, while reading was often seen as a collective activity, writing was usually remembered as a solitary activity.

Chapters five and six, respectively titled “Writing for a Living: Literacy and the Knowledge Economy” and “The Status of Writing”, both address the nearly inextricable linkages created when writing becomes the process and “chief commercial production of an organization—” (Brandt, 2009, p. 119). Brandt characterizes knowledge economies as those “industries that create and sell information or expert knowledge directly as well as those that make products whose chief ingredient is knowledge” (p. 118). In this regard, individuals’ writing skills are raw materials that are fashioned into sellable goods. To underscore this point, Brandt conducted in-depth interviews with twelve people who labor in writing-intensive settings. She asserts that in these knowledge economy conditions, one’s writing is more highly regulated by in-house entities and federal agencies whose disparate pressures coalesce to create rocky terrains for writing.

Being concerned with the shift from mass reading literacy to mass writing literacy, in chapter seven, “How Writing is Remaking Reading”, Brandt considers the ways in which the last 50 years have been marked as a time of sponsorship of writing literacy in addition to reading. It is her contention that educators and others concerned about students’ literacy skills be mindful of the ways writing has emerged and “readers [have been] repositioned within writers” (166) instead of writers being positioned through readers, as was often the case historically. Access to diverse technologies now means that students are likely to read (i.e., text messages, blog postings, and other social networking status updates) in order to write responses, whereas in years past, students would write to showcase their comprehension of reading materials. She suggests that writing sponsors strive to provide equitable access to resources for all students, especially those students who may be most affected by economic and technological vicissitudes.

As Brandt draws to a close, she reiterates the need for those who are committed “to democracy in public education” (p. 188) to understand literacy in a civil rights context and not simply as resources to economic productivity. She extends the argument that literacy—reading and writing—helps create an informed citizenry that strengthens democracy. And under those circumstances, it is imperative to recognize that patterns of sponsorship create unequal access to sponsors who can help bankroll one’s success.

Although Literacy and Learning: Reflections on Writing, Reading, and Society is a compilation of previous writings and conversations, Brandt’s approach to literacy and its connections to broader societal transformations is timely. However, readers may be disappointed to learn that no explicit activities are included to guide teachers in identifying sponsors, besides guardians and other teachers, who may operate in the background to provide students’ access to literacy. Although teachers might find it quite difficult to find to talk with students at length about their memories of learning to read and write, as Brandt did with her participants, asking students to write their literacy narratives may help alleviate issues arising from time
constraints and further connect reading and writing.

Altogether, *Literacy and Learning: Reflections on Writing, Reading, and Society* is an integral text for anyone concerned with literacy and how it gets intertwined with productivity. Although the book provides reflection questions to ponder over and a general overview of Brandt’s significant contributions to the field of critical literacy studies, readers would be remiss to rely solely on this text in attempts to better understand literacy sponsorship. Brandt’s text focuses attention on literacy within broader contexts of productivity and access.

**References**


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