

How We Write

Season 2, Episode 3: Literacy Files/Sponsored by Social Media

TRANSCRIPT

Alice: Welcome to How We Write, the podcast of the University Writing Center at the University of Texas at Austin. I'm Alice Batt.

[00:00:32] Our two most recent episodes were the keynote speeches from the UWC's 30th Anniversary Celebration. Today we resume our series The Literacy Files, where students from my 2022 Writing Center Internship class discuss how various kinds of sponsorship affected their development as writers.

[00:00:50] Their understanding of sponsorship was shaped by an essay from 1998 entitled "Sponsors of Literacy," where Deborah Brandt defines sponsors as "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" (Brandt 166). Students drew from that definition to write their own literacy narratives, and then formed groups to see what they could learn from sharing them with each other.

[00:01:22] In this episode, writing center interns Grace, Celeste and Britney explore how growing up with social media shaped their development as writers.

Grace: [00:01:31] Hey, everyone. Today we're here with the How We Write podcast. My name is Grace, and I'm here with Britney and Celeste.

Celeste: Hi, y'all. It's Celeste.

Britney: Hi, y'all, it's Britney.

Grace: And today we'll be talking about our narratives that we wrote for our writing center class. We wrote our narratives based off of Brandt's "Sponsors of Literacy," which

we'll be talking about a little bit later. So first, Britney, if you wanted to just talk a little bit about your narrative.

Britney: [00:01:55] Yeah. Grace, Thanks for asking, actually. So first I talked about my love for reading and how that kind of develops because of my parents' influence. And later I talk about how as I was growing up and when I eventually reached high school, I realized that the science fiction and fantasy books that I had been reading didn't really represent me. Like I didn't see myself in the characters. I didn't see myself on the covers of these books. And so after this, like I realized this issue of diversity in books, I began going on social media. So like Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and I use those platforms to kind of discover new, diverse books that I could read with authors that knew my experience.

Celeste: [00:02:49] That's so cool that you were able to utilize social media like that. Is there any kind of online channels that you're still on today?

Britney: Yeah, I am super involved with Book Twitter. It's exactly what it sounds like. It's the book community on Twitter. It's made up of readers, book bloggers, authors, and it's a really supportive community where people recommend diverse books to each other or they discuss common themes that are seen in these books. Additionally, I'm also on Book Instagram where people can post pictures of their books and like really nice and pretty collages and add recommendations.

Celeste: [00:03:30] That's so cool. I have to check this out.

Grace: Very cool. Britney, how does your interest in books and fiction translate to an interest in writing?

Britney: So I think that after I gained this kind of newfound interest in diversity in reading, I was kind of inspired to write my own book. I know it's a long shot, but I would love to write my own children's book, and I'm currently drafting a manuscript about a Vietnamese American girl just like me.

Grace: Very cool. Celeste, did you want to talk a little bit about your literary narrative?

Celeste: [00:04:07] Yeah. So similar to you, Britney. It had a lot to do with social media. When I was in the third grade, I think I accidentally won a contest for comma placement in my elementary school. And coincidentally, around the same time, my older sister had gotten Instagram and was convinced she was going to be famous online. So, she hired me for \$2, a caption to write her Instagram captions for a year or so. And I got so into it, I worshipped my older sister, and so I was just happy to be there for her. But I loved, like, putting the sentences together and being able to publish writing. So, it kind of influenced my schoolwork. And my third-grade teacher noticed and offered me a spot on the yearbook committee doing captions. So that was kind of my entry into writing and journalistic writing.

Britney: [00:04:53] So, Celeste, that actually sounds really cool. Do you still use your captioning skills today, like with your own Instagram or with your friends? If you're looking for more money, I could actually hire you [laughs].

Celeste: I think I might ask for a raise. I might need more than \$2 these days. But yeah, for sure. I mean that like practice writing kind of that short, punchy prose definitely comes in handy in journalism writing headlines and word count is always a big deal. Yeah, I should definitely look into putting that into my own Instagram for sure.

Grace: [00:05:26] Very cool, Celeste. I know social media is often very short Instagram captions. How did like an interest in social media translate into like reading and writing in long form?

Celeste: [00:04:20] Sure. So it's a hard lesson to learn, especially for me, but like a length of a paper. It doesn't always equal merit. That's what I tell my sister all the time. And so kind of that practice, it's just composition and editing and even like the use of emojis or little smiley emoticons that all factors into kind of expression. And obviously my skills have grown since then, hopefully. But that was definitely kind of my entryway into more complicated forms of writing.

Britney: [00:06:05] And so, Grace, you've heard our story, so we want to hear yours. What was your literacy narrative about?

Grace: Sure. My narrative is about my friendship with my best friend, whose name is Mihica. We've been friends since 2011, almost 11 full years right now. We met in Nigeria. Both of our parents work in oil. And yeah, we basically just became really fast friends. We love talking to each other. We both were like really interested in reading and writing. She's an excellent writer. She's a lot better than I am, but we basically just fostered that love of reading. We read a lot of Harry Potter, Percy Jackson, you know, the kind of like standard 2010s literature. I don't know, we were just kind of like book geeks and book nerds and stuff. And that translates into an interest in writing all through our English classes. But yeah, when we moved back, we basically stayed friends over email. You know, there's a pretty large time difference, [9-10 hours] and so we were able to just connect that way.

Britney: [00:07:00] So if y'all hadn't had access to like social media or the Internet back then, do you think you would have been able to stay in contact with her, or do you think y'all would have drifted apart?

Grace: Sure. I definitely think we would have drifted apart. Part of it was intent, like I still had some friends back there. We don't talk to you that much anymore. But she and I wanted to stay friends. Social media and like Google Hangouts has been really helpful in that regard.

Celeste: [00:07:26] Well, I can definitely relate to the Harry Potter 2010 book trends. Are you all still using the same online communication tools today?

Grace: Yeah, yeah. Like Google Hangouts, was like all the rage back in like 2011, 2012. Like WhatsApp really wasn't like a huge thing then. But yeah, we still use that. It's just like old habits. She was actually talking to me during my Chinese class today. I was like, "girl, I got I got stuff to do." But she's 9 hours, she's a nine hour timezone, but I take the chance when I can talk to her when I can. So I'm like, "Screw, screw class, I can talk to you."

[laughs]

Celeste: Priorities.

Grace: [00:08:00] Yeah. We've been talking a little bit about the themes of connection and the dual nature of the Internet and also about how our literacy was shaped and impacted by these themes.

Britney: So actually, I wanted to start off by talking about how honestly, I've never thought about the different things I might have influenced my literacy until I actually read Brandt's "Sponsors of Literacy" in our writing class. And her essay actually helped me realize that there are so many different factors that really go into shaping our literacy, like how we read, how you write, so many different aspects of literacy. And after I read her article, I realized, wow, like the Internet and social media have definitely strongly shaped my literacy and I'm sure like the literacy of generations to come. I'm sure when Brandt wrote this and what was it like the 1990s or whatever, she couldn't even think about the implications that the Internet or social media could have.

Grace: [00:09:05] Yeah, and continuing on that, I remember her essay. She talks a lot about how institutions and people have often used literacy and withheld it from other people in powerful situations. And I think it's interesting, especially how the Internet specifically as a sponsored literacy, is kind of equalizing the playing field in some ways and how the Internet has been like accessible for basically everyone, right? It's like global, around the world. Like it's pretty easy for even the poorest peoples of the world to use it. Right? And so it's kind of like made literacy extremely high. Like you could say that nowadays literacy is rising everywhere In the world.

Celeste: [00:09:41] It's kind of funny you say that, Grace, because that accessibility, I mean, that's kind of a double edged sword. I was nine, ten years old on the Internet scrolling through and writing things. And I mean, Instagram was the wild, Wild West back then. It was kind of a public forum, there wasn't much regulation. And I was getting, you know, hate comments on funny captions about my sister's visit to the new *Twilight* movie from random people I didn't know. And writing is such a personal thing, back then it kind of hurt a little bit, even though it was, you know, thoughts online.

Britney: [00:10:08] Yeah. Honestly, when you say that Instagram was a wild, wild West back then, I think Twitter is today the equivalent of that. Like, I feel like Twitter is like... That's where the worst or the worst on the Internet can be. But also I think it has the potential to be really great as well. I think from my own experiences and from the

research that I did for my literacy narrative, I learned that authors from marginalized communities that normally wouldn't be heard in mainstream media or through the mainstream publishing industry could really make sure that their voices are heard through like Twitter hashtags, like #diversify yourself or #ownvoices. So although I definitely think that Twitter and other social media platforms can really be harmful because of how open they are, I think they also have the potential to do good things by bringing up social issues.

Celeste: [00:11:05] Yeah, I totally agree, Britney. I think that social media kind of brings with it its own form of literacy and the form of these social justice movements, right. Which are in the end just a product of kind of the sponsor we were talking about. So, it's really just a different kind of literacy that you can find on Twitter. And it's something I think that we were all exposed to like a pretty young age.

Grace: [00:11:25] Yeah, And I definitely think on that thread, some of the research I was doing was a little bit about pen pal relationships because of how I talked about my relationship with my friend. And some of the research I was doing about is how back then it was kind of like an exotic or kind of foreign thing. But with the internet you got a lot of like online pen pal kind of relationships that you could forge with people. And you could forge a relationship with somebody like in a continent across me, right? And you could still have that connection. But even now, even without the Internet, there still is that sense of like wanting to maintain something kind of like, quote unquote, authentic, that kind of move away from like the Internet and this very, like, polished, romanticized idea of what other people look like, the highlight reels that you kind of see on Instagram and whatnot. So, I definitely think that was kind of interesting about how, you know, you're seeing a version of the Internet and you're communicating through that way. But at the same time, it's not that authentic, right? So, when you talk about connections, like what kind of connection do we actually mean?

Celeste: [00:12:21] For sure. And I don't mean to disregard that sense of connection at all, but I will say back when we all grew up, I feel like the social media we were experiencing is very different from the social media we're experiencing now. Part of my research looked into those kind of regulations that have increased, and I mean, it's definitely improved. It's limited access in some ways, but I think you're right, Grace. And saying that it's kind of fostered almost an inauthentic sense of connection, I want to

say? There's a sense that you're talking to other people, but I'm not sure if it's that same kind of personal, I don't know, maybe more traditional sponsor of writing that Brandt mentions.

Britney: [00:13:00] I think that even though social media has evolved today to the point where the writing that you do put out, like in your tweets or your Instagram captions or your posts or whatever, aren't completely authentic in some ways. Positively or negatively. In the end, they do influence your literacy. Like Brandt said. All these sponsors of literacy kind of gain some sort of advantage from giving you access to literacy. So although, let's say, for example, your parent benefits from your literacy because that means that you'll get good grades and you'll go into a good school or maybe have a good career. I think that other sponsors of literacy, like maybe the traditional publishing industry, get benefits that don't necessarily align with their consumers benefits. Like, for example, the publishing industry profits off of your literacy and they might not have your best intentions in mind, which is why diversity is such an issue, because the kinds of books that sell or the kinds of books that don't highlight marginalized authors. So I think that these sponsors of literacy, they benefit, but not always in a good way.

Grace: Yeah.

Celeste: [00:14:20] Yeah. Like you were saying, or I guess like we're saying, Britney, the publishing industry and the issues of diversity within it is just one example of an issue that social media amplifies, right? Like when I'm getting hate comments on my captions or whatever. That's just literary critique taken to 1000 for ten-year-olds by random people online. But it's an existing issue and it exists, I think, with a lot of different sponsors.

Grace: I think that would be perfect way to end. Thanks so much for listening. If you were interested in any of the resources or citations we talked about in this podcast episode, you can see them in the podcast description.

Celeste: See y'all later.

Alice [00:14:55]: You've been listening to UWC interns Grace, Celeste, and Britney discuss how social media sponsored their development as writers. *How We Write* is a production of the University Writing Center at the University of Texas at Austin. Our theme music was created by Michele Solberg. Until next time, keep writing.

[end 00:15:14]

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