

How We Write

“The Literacy Files” Series—Introduction

Transcript

Welcome to How We Write, the podcast of the University Writing Center at The University of Texas at Austin. I’m Alice Batt, and I’m happy to introduce a series of episodes called “The Literacy Files.” They’re produced by students I had the pleasure of teaching in my Spring 2022 Writing Center Internship Class.

[00:43] In a few moments, you’ll hear the first episode, but first I’ll give you a little context so you’ll know what to expect. In each episode of the series, students will share an aspect of what they learned about literacy throughout the semester, both from their training in writing center methods and from their reading of Deborah Brandt’s essay “Sponsors of Literacy,” which appeared in *College Composition & Communication* in 1998.

[1:05] Brandt interviewed 100 people about their literacy development, and she observed that they all had some sort of “sponsors” of their literacy. She defined 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).

[1:29] It’s a definition that encompasses parents and teachers, but also school systems, businesses, religious institutions, ideologies, political systems, and the like. Brandt asks us to think about individual literacy as a site where various human, political, and economic entities jockey for

influence—where they offer access to particular knowledge and skills and obtain in return something they value, such as association, loyalty, compliance, or labor.

[1:59] I assigned Brandt's essay for a few reasons. First, I thought it would help interns get comfortable thinking of literacy in terms of what people have done and can do, rather than in terms of what they lack. So often conversations about literacy harp on what students can't do, or what a person who has a first language other than English can't do. This is especially true in conversations about writing. While Brandt makes clear that different kinds of stratification control the paths to literacy people can access, she talks about literacy itself, in all its variety, in positive terms, in terms of what people have learned and can do. I thought this was an important model for prospective writing center consultants to learn. In my experience, the most successful consultants are the ones who can appreciate and reflect writers' strengths first, and then help them identify and address areas of their writing they wish to develop.

[2:54] Second, I thought it would be important for the interns to consider the many different paths people can take to develop their literacy, and the ways those paths are shaped by identity, institutions, and material conditions. This seemed like good preparation for their work with other students at a large public university, whose paths might mirror—or be very different from—their own.

[3:16] Third, I was curious to see what they might make of the notion that sponsors gain something from sponsoring literacy.

[3:24] After we discussed Brandt's essay, each intern wrote a narrative about a particular aspect of their own development as writers, or that of someone they knew. Once they'd written their story, they needed to identify relevant sponsors and explain how those sponsors came to bear on literacy development. Later in the semester, students self-selected into groups and shared their narratives with each other. Their podcasts offer snapshots of what sharing their stories taught them about literacy and writing center work.

[3:53] Stay tuned for the first episode of the series, where Mae, Lexi, Megan, and Sylvia explore how humbling experiences and great teachers turned them into the writers—and writing consultants—they are today.

Works Cited

Brandt, Deborah. "Sponsors of Literacy." CCC, Vol.49, Number 2, May 1998, pp. 165-185.