

## Symposium: Literacy Sponsorship, GenAI, and the Entangled Economies of Experiential Learning

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Deborah Brandt's concept of literacy sponsorship—agents who enable and regulate literacy while also benefiting from it—remains foundational in writing studies. Yet as Brandt noted in a 2015 commentary, the theory's sharper insights into power, ideology, and asymmetry have often been tempered in practice. Over the past two decades, scholars have extended the framework to account for more diffuse and layered networks of sponsorship: from community organizations and online platforms (Wargo) to legal systems (Tomlinson), families (Webb-Sunderhaus), and even spatial or infrastructural conditions (Pennell; Perry). While some sponsors are human, others are material, technological, or abstract.

In this symposium piece, I return to Brandt's framework to explore how the rise of generative AI (genAI) invites a renewed look at sponsorship under current conditions of literacy work, which is already increasingly multimodal and experiential. These conditions suggest that sponsorship in this space is shaped through co-inquiry and shared uncertainty; however, asymmetrical power relations in the realm of genAI might look different in sponsorship when roles and bases of knowledge become more fluid and when literacies are co-authored in real time.

### REVISITING BRANDT AND LITERACY SPONSORSHIP

Deborah Brandt's foundational concept of literacy sponsorship emerged from a broad historical inquiry grounded in over 100 interviews spanning nearly a century of American life ("Sponsors" 167). From these accounts, she identified recurring patterns in which individuals' literacy learning was shaped by agents—teachers, employers, institutions—who not only facilitated access to reading and writing but also gained from that literacy in ideological, economic, institutional, or reputational terms (166). Sponsorship, in this frame, is not neutral: it reflects transactions structured by power, access, and institutional investment.

Although Brandt did not focus explicitly on community partnerships or reciprocal learning exchanges, her work laid a foundation for later inquiries into those spaces. In my earlier research on digital community archives, for instance, I traced how users and organizers co-constructed literacy practices through a mix of institutional support, community values, and personal storytelling. There, I observed multiple, overlapping sponsors—some visible, others latent—shaping literacy in distributed and often improvised ways. That experience deepened my attention not only to who sponsors literacy but how sponsorship circulates and becomes shared or co-authored across

communities.

Still, Brandt herself expressed concern about how the theory has sometimes been softened. In a 2015 commentary, she noted with some dismay that “sponsors of literacy” had been taken up as more benign than she intended. Rather than neutral enablers of access, she emphasized, sponsors wield power and often shape literacy’s terms in ways that reinforce broader social and economic inequities (“Commentary” 330). To re-engage that sharper sense of sponsorship’s reach, I turn to scholars who build on Brandt by complicating where—and how—literacy sponsorship happens.

Michael C. Pennell, in his article “(Re)Placing Literacy: Space and the Discourse of Citizenship,” examines how literacies are shaped by the spatial and civic infrastructures of urban environments. Through mapping tools, he traces how individuals navigate systems such as public housing, education, and transportation to access literate practices. Pennell conceptualizes literacy sponsorship as spatially and socially distributed in that it is tied to institutions as well as the material, infrastructural conditions in which literacy unfolds. While Brandt emphasized asymmetry and economic gain, Pennell brings deeper into focus how individuals navigate and reshape the routes that connect them to sponsors. His work underscores the agency of the sponsored as he found they asserted influence, reinterpreted resources, and sometimes reconfigured the systems that shape their literacy lives. Sponsorship here is not a one-way transmission but a dynamic, reciprocal process conditioned by institutional power, material constraint, and personal adaptation.

This distributed, negotiated view of sponsorship finds further refinement in Kara Poe Alexander’s concept of reciprocal literacy sponsorship. Writing about service-learning contexts, Alexander argues that students and community partners often sponsor one another’s literacies. Rather than casting sponsorship as a top-down transfer, she describes a more fluid relationship in which learning is mutual even amid asymmetry. In her framing, reciprocity does not necessarily involve an equal exchange; however, there is a pedagogical possibility grounded in co-learning and shifting roles.

Alexander’s model helps clarify how responsibility, authority, and learning are distributed in experiential contexts. It also foregrounds the stakes of naming: when we call something “reciprocal,” what kinds of labor are we recognizing? Whose authority are we affirming? These questions feel especially urgent as experiential learning environments now include, in addition to students and community members, genAI.

Reciprocity, in this light, involves more than participation or access. It signals a relationship marked by responsive, shared learning. This distinction becomes critical in settings where genAI and experiential learning converge, including spaces where learners interact with human and nonhuman sponsors in ways that are enabling and constraining, interdependent and affective. These layered sites of literacy work ask us to think of reciprocity as situated co-creation of knowledge.

## INSTITUTIONAL CASE: GENERATIVE AI AND EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

To explore this in practice, I turn to my institution, Babson College—a small business school in the northeastern United States where undergraduate students take half of their courses in the liberal arts. Here, students are encountering genAI technologies both in traditional classroom settings (such as writing and marketing courses) and in more hands-on, experiential environments. In our yearlong Foundations of Entrepreneurship and Management course, for example, all first-year students start a business, and genAI tools are now integrated into venture development processes. Outside the classroom, student-led clubs and co-curricular events extend these encounters. Many students are also learning independently: watching YouTube tutorials, sharing experiments, and weaving genAI tools into personal projects.

One recent initiative co-led by faculty and students asked: what happens when undergraduates, still developing their own understanding of genAI, help local small business owners explore how these tools might support their work? Called the AI Innovators Bootcamp, this full-day event—designed and delivered by The Generator, Babson’s interdisciplinary AI lab—brought together small business owners and student leaders to explore genAI’s practical potential. While faculty helped facilitate, students led the workshops, introduced tools, and guided conversations about real-world application. Topics ranged from customer insight and sales management to rapid prototyping and no-code development.

In this setting, sponsorship did not follow a single path. Business owners—many of them Babson alumni—brought deep contextual knowledge of their industries, clients, and constraints. Students offered technical fluency as well as a readiness to adapt. What emerged were reciprocal moments not necessarily equal in power but collaborative in spirit. Knowledge, authority, and learning moved across lines of age, role, and experience. Students helped business owners navigate emerging tools, while business owners pressed students to make literacy decisions with real stakes such as tone, branding, customer experience, organizational identity. These exchanges created a recursively sponsored engagement with both technology and one another’s values, assumptions, and literacies. In grounding tools in lived entrepreneurial realities, it appeared students were reshaping their understanding of genAI literacy in real time given the real stakes of the work.

As one student reflected, “The greatest barrier to AI adoption isn’t complexity—it’s the absence of welcoming spaces where business owners can experiment without judgment” (Ishoof). The bootcamp, then, was more than a training: it became a site of tentative co-sponsorship where participants took turns guiding one another through unfamiliar terrain and, as observed in the process, reshaped what literacy in this space meant.

## GENERATIVE AI AS SPONSOR, SPONSORED, AND MEDIUM

In the context of genAI-mediated experiential learning, tools like ChatGPT are also actors that shape how literacy unfolds. When students prompt these systems to brainstorm solutions or generate content, they are not only developing new literacies but also encountering the assumptions embedded in the systems themselves. These tools encode particular logics about audience, genre, efficiency, and tone. In this sense, genAI functions as a technological sponsor: mediating access to literacy and influencing which forms of communication appear viable, valuable, or legible.

At the same time, genAI is not a fixed force. It is trained and interpreted in use. Students must evaluate its outputs, refine their prompts, and make decisions about when to accept, revise, or discard what it produces. In doing so, they participate in shaping how genAI is understood and operationalized, in this case, by themselves and by the small business owners with whom they collaborate. In this way, students become sponsors of genAI literacy, particularly as it stands within the cultural and rhetorical frameworks that define how it is read and assessed.

This bidirectional dynamic blurs traditional distinctions between sponsor and sponsored. GenAI is both structuring and structured: it shapes literate activity even as it is interpreted, challenged, and constrained by human actors. These dynamics become especially visible when students guide business owners through ethical or strategic questions about genAI use. When I talk to students about their genAI usage and various ethical considerations such as the homogenization of thought and whose ideas become the default, they often find themselves negotiating between the promise of automation and the demands of representation, fairness, or trust. In these moments, they are not simply conduits for a new technology; instead, they are literacy brokers who are interpreting tools and surfacing values.

## RETHINKING LITERACY ECONOMIES

The literacy economy emerging from genAI-mediated, community-based learning resists clear transactions or linear exchanges. It operates instead as a distributed, dynamic ecology shaped by institutional ambitions, technological infrastructures, local knowledge, and mutual improvisation. In this context, literacy is a shared, evolving practice formed through iterative acts of dialogue and experimentation.

This framing invites us to reconsider what it means to benefit from literacy and who gets to define that value. In Brandt's original model, sponsors often gained from the success of the sponsored in ways that aligned with institutional, corporate, or ideological goals. In the example explored here with the AI Innovators Bootcamp, those dynamics still apply, but the benefits are more layered and uneven. Students gain rhetorical agility, technical fluency, and a deeper understanding of genAI literacy. Business owners gain access to tools and frameworks they might not otherwise prioritize. The institution accrues reputational benefit and community goodwill. Yet none of these gains are

neutral. They are mediated by access, shaped by labor, and conditioned by the structural inequalities that determine who participates—and who profits.

What makes this economy mutual is not its balance but its entanglement. Participants—human and nonhuman—co-author literacies in motion, shaping one another’s understanding while moving through various constraints. GenAI, in this light, is a site of negotiation and interpretation and a space where values and practices are tested. Sponsorship here operates less as a gatekeeping function than as a diffuse network of influence that is enabling and constraining, generative and precarious.

As writing studies continues to engage the pedagogical and ethical dimensions of genAI, this kind of experiential site underscores the need for a more flexible vocabulary of sponsorship—one that reflects the negotiated, distributed, and multidirectional nature of contemporary literacy work. Rather than asking only who sponsors literacy, we might also ask how sponsorship circulates, through what platforms, toward what ends, and under what conditions it begins to feel reciprocal (not reciprocal in the sense of equivalence but in the sense of shared investment and mutual consequence). These are questions of economy and also of ethics and responsibility.

## CONCLUSION: A NETWORKED THEORY OF SPONSORSHIP

This symposium essay has proposed a broadened theory of literacy sponsorship that accounts for the relational, networked, and recursive dynamics taking shape in genAI-mediated experiential learning. Drawing on a case where undergraduate students acted as both learners and provisional sponsors alongside small business owners, I’ve observed literacy practices unfolding within tangled webs of interaction among students, institutions, communities, and generative technologies. These webs disrupt linear models of sponsorship and invite us to see literacy development as a process of co-creation that is shaped by shifting roles, uneven access, and shared stakes.

This work builds on Brandt’s attention to the ideological and economic dimensions of sponsorship, particularly in terms of its movement—how it circulates, reorganizes, and surfaces in contexts where learners become teachers, tools offer instruction, and institutions are shaped by those they aim to guide. Literacy gains in these settings are deeply contextual, often plural, and bound up in relational insight. As technologies like genAI continue to reshape collaboration, we’ll need to keep asking not only who sponsors literacy but how sponsorship itself is being reimagined and redistributed.

By framing genAI-inflected, community-engaged learning as a site of tentative co-sponsorship, I hope to encourage further inquiry into the economies, ethics, and pedagogies of literacy in an age of distributed expertise. In this context, terms like *mutual* or *relational* don’t necessarily signal any form of balance, but they might help us name moments of shared investment, however partial, across human and nonhuman actors. Though these conditions are uneven and contingent, they call us to remain attuned to both the generative possibilities and the ideological freight of emerging literacy systems and to keep justice, access, and reflection at the center of our work.

This symposium piece is just one example, offered as an opening to which I hope others might

respond. What other sites of co-sponsorship are we overlooking? What ethical and rhetorical tensions emerge when literacy circulates across students, community partners, institutions, and machines? And how might we—as researchers, educators, and participants—revise our theories to better reflect the messy, entangled economies of literacy already taking shape? Observing students work with small business owners gave me a measure of critical distance to begin sorting new ideas about sponsorship. It has also unsettled my own image of myself as the main expert in my writing classrooms and is prompting me to look more closely at how sponsorship already circulates there. Especially in this moment of genAI, perhaps I need to be more attentive to what my students are teaching me in return.

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