

Book Review *The Rise of Writing:
Redefining Mass Literacy*, by Deborah Brandt

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In her new book *The Rise of Writing*, Deborah Brandt takes on an ambitious task: to examine the changing ways that people engage with writing in the twenty-first century and construct a new understanding of mass literacy from that examination. “For the first time in history,” Brandt notes, “masses of humans have keyboards under their hands that connect them to people at a distance and screens that shine back at them the public look of their own written words” (159). Writing through the eyes of her many research subjects, Brandt shows the shifts in mass literacy, the forces that have built those shifts, and the complex ramifications of them in ways that will be useful for future writing researchers and writing teachers.

Brandt’s new work emerges from her earlier work on sponsors of literacy; in *Literacy in American Lives*, she argues that the literacy development of individuals is “sponsored” by larger social forces that shape what kinds of learning students engage in when it comes to writing, what kinds of writing they do not engage in, and the purposes for which such writing is used. In *The Rise of Writing*, Brandt carries her project forward to identify the effects of sponsors not only on individual literacy learning but on the collective, substantial shifts in literacy development in the twenty-first century. The text, organized into four chapters bookended by an introduction and conclusion, tackles the status of writing in the twenty-first century, the trials and tribulations of writing for the state, and the role of writing literacy (and sponsors of writing literacy) for contemporary young adults. Through these different foci, Brandt is able to use her interview data to break open complex issues of ownership, representation, and the role of the writer (and writing) in society in order to build a theory of literacy situated in writing and “in tune with the communicative arrangements of our time” (126).

Brandt’s findings emerge from a collection of interviews with people whose jobs involved writing at least 15% of the time on a daily basis. During the interviews, Brandt’s subjects served as “witnesses to socio-historical change” (8). Through the witnessing power of her subjects, Brandt is able to address a variety of important issues: the ways in which writing in the twenty-first century is pulling mass literacy in new directions, the moral and habitual growth that occurs via mass writing literacy, the emergence of writing as a primary form of twenty-first century work, the inter-institutional shaping of “workaday” (26) writing into something both socially invisible and individually meaningful, and the status of writing as well as the ways in which it situates people. These issues coalesce, in her text, around the concept of the rise of mass writing literacy in the US, as well as the social forces that have worked and are working to sponsor that rise.

At the heart of this study is the “[g]ritty vocational heritage of writing and its association with work, competition, artisanship, commercialism, apprenticeship, performance, and publicity” (127), a heritage sponsored by forces much different from the sponsors of mass reading literacy. This difference is important for Brandt; it leads her to locate significant writing development in the lives

of her interview subjects outside of traditional school experiences: in special interest writing, in activism, in the everyday work of many twenty-first century occupations. Writing, Brandt argues, is “worldly work” (97); that is, it is grounded in, and emerges from, the daily activity of people attempting to get by in the world and, as a result of that worldiness, it often seems dissociated from the sponsors of literacy supporting mass reading. Mass writing’s surge into prominence, in fact, causes reading (as well as the sponsors of literacy that support specific kinds of reading) to fall back, becoming a tool to shape writing rather than something that is encountered with and understood through writing.

Brandt traces the differences in writing and reading sponsors to the historical development of mass reading and writing in the West. The complex histories from which reading and writing literacies emerge have shaped these literacies in problematic ways. Older social arrangements of culture—when readers far outnumbered writers—have created an approach to thinking about reading and writing literacies in ways that do not accurately account for how writing and reading are used in the twenty-first century. Brandt asks, “Is it possible to contemplate a mass literacy based on new relationships between writing and reading such that how and why we write will condition how and why we read? Is it possible—indeed necessary—to contemplate new approaches to literacy based primarily in writing?” (159). The answer to these questions, Brandt argues, is yes. The task that Brandt takes up in her work is to trace out a framework for such an approach to literacy. Using sponsors of literacy as a driving concept, along with a methodology for identifying sponsors of literacy within her interviews, helps Brandt realize the value of workplaces as engines of literacy production and, in particular, as engines of *writing* literacy production. The rise of workplaces as sponsors of literacy—what Brandt refers to as the second stage of mass literacy in the US—turns writing into a form of labor, something with complex social consequences.

The rise of writing and, particularly, the sponsoring of writing as a form of labor, enmeshes the act of writing within 21st century understandings of labor. Because it is so caught up as a form of labor, the value of writing is transformed through different industry demands. What Brandt refers to as *workaday* writing is often transformative for individuals and yet, at the same time, not considered intellectual labor of the same level as literature. Writing for the state, for private companies, or even ghostwriting allows individuals to understand their world and their place in it, yet the writing that actually comes of those situations is not “theirs,” but rather in the possession of the state, company, or individual for whom these individuals write. The literate efforts of these individuals are, in essence, rendered invisible by the organizational structures of our time.

These workplace literacy sponsors, though enabling mass writing literacy in a seemingly invisible manner, still enable what Brandt refers to as an era of *deep writing*, when “more and more people write for prolonged periods of time from deeply inside interactive networks and in immersive cognitive states, driven not merely by the orchestration of memory, muscle, language, and task but by the effects that writing can have on others and the self” (160). Deep writing, with its hallmarks of consequentiality, drama, and complicatedness, occurs when individuals orient themselves to extensive writing tasks that require the reorientation of other literate activity—such as reading—in order to construct a desired written product. This shift, from reading to Brandt’s definition of *deep*

writing, carries with it myriad limits and possibilities, possible strengths and serious issues stemming from the troubled past of the sponsors of literacy who enable such a shift.

Brandt's approach to addressing the rise of mass writing is useful for multiple audiences. The concept of sponsors of literacy, as well as the greater narrative within which those sponsors fit, sheds useful light on the changing processes through which literacies are picked up by writers over time. *The Rise of Writing* unveils a clash of sponsoring forces in the literate development of individuals, and that clash is leading to dynamically different literacy understanding and uptake over time. Brandt's identification and explanation of these changes—and the theory that she subsequently develops—makes her work useful for teachers of writing, literacy researchers, and researchers interested in writing development. Furthermore, this text can be useful for individuals looking to examine their own development retrospectively as literate participants in society, as the shifts in mass literacy that Brandt describes are nothing less than tectonic and have shaped (and will continue to shape) the literate activity of the readers of this text just as surely as it has influenced her research subjects. As researchers in writing studies, literacy studies, and K-20 education take their work further into the 21st century, they can and should use *The Rise of Writing* as one of the key texts to navigating the constantly-changing literate waters they are working in.

WORKS CITED

- Brandt, Deborah. *Literacy in American Lives*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001. Print.
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