

Sponsoring Literacy Studies

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The study of literacy over the last 40 years has undergone incredible transformation, moving from viewing literacy as a great cognitive leap in human development to situating literacy in specific social and cultural contexts to examining how the advent of new digital composing technologies may transform literacy practices. In *Composition and Rhetoric*, the study of literacy has been shaped by scholars such as Harvey Graff, Brian Street, Shirley Brice Heath, Anne Ruggles Gere, Jacqueline Jones Royster, and Deborah Brandt among others, who have helped to broaden our understandings about how literacy is practiced, where it takes place, and for what purposes.

In this short essay, I want to consider, first, how literacy studies as a field has been sponsored—What work has been foundational, transformative, and innovative?—and second, to reflect on how my own study of literacy has been sponsored. In particular, I want to think about how Brandt’s concept of “sponsorship” has not only been transformative in conceptualizing the dynamics of literacy, but how it is also useful in addressing questions of equity and diversity within literacy studies. As defined by Brandt, “sponsors of literacy” are “any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, and model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold, literacy—and gain advantage by it in some way” (19). It is the first part of this definition that is key to my discussion: How have sponsors who “enable, support, teach, and model” informed what we do as a field broadly, and what I have done in my own work specifically? In theorizing a deep understanding of how literacy is enacted, Brandt has helped us to see that literacy does not simply empower or provide access to resources for individuals, but perhaps most importantly creates a complex web of relationships that may sustain literate action. We might think of sponsorship itself as a literacy practice and as literate action, marshalling resources in order to create opportunities for literacy development.

NARRATIVES OF LITERACY

In the spirit of Beth Daniell’s discussion of “narratives of literacy,” I revisit briefly a few studies of literacy that have also functioned as narratives of sponsorship, providing the theoretical and methodological frameworks that have sponsored further study of literacy. While we might think of some of these studies as providing the “grand narratives” of literacy that have been foundational to the field, we might also consider these studies as “little narratives” that have created personal touchstones in our work. For example, when I was a graduate student reading the historical and theoretical work of Harvey Graff and Deborah Brandt to understand the breadth and depth of literacy studies, it would never have occurred to me that twenty years later I might some day sit on a panel with them at a conference, be considered a colleague and friend, or even work in the same department. In this

sense, their scholarship has sponsored my own work in both grand and little ways, in both professional and personal contexts.

In his examination of literacy within and across historical periods in Western society, Harvey Graff has focused on how literacy has been used in the interests of Western culture and society and its consequences. Unlike the earlier and seminal work of Jack Goody and Ian Watt or Eric Havelock that extolled the virtues of literacy in the building of Western society and culture, Graff offers a more critical and sometimes skeptical view of the benefits of literacy. Rather, Graff argues that the “literacy myth” and the “legacies of literacy” have often promised more than literacy itself can deliver, whether that be a belief that there is an objective, quantifiable standard of literacy that can be measured and used unproblematically to compare individuals or groups, or a direct connection between literacy and material, political, or moral capital, or a growing belief in multiple literacies as a way to more accurately describe the uses and meanings of literacy (*Labyrinths* 320-21). What I have found so useful in Graff’s work is his examination of the myths and legacies of literacy within a long historical view because “historical interpretation offers potentially innovative approaches . . . to reforming questions and problems, understanding, criticism, and alternative conceptualizations and perspectives” (*Labyrinths* 320). Rather than placing literacy within the capacity of individual achievement alone or viewing literacy as a mark of social development for groups, Graff’s work allows for a structural analysis of the uses of literacy in historical contexts. This makes possible Graff’s search for “continuities and contradictions” in the history of literacy, creating more complex and nuanced understandings of literacy by looking beyond its promise and examining how literacy is more often concomitant of social and individual change than it is the origin of such change. Such a historical framework has helped me to study the history of literacy practices of Asian Americans in Hawai‘i, where the myths and legacies of American missionary contact have often been used to structure and organize social relations, using literacy as a proxy for racial and ethnic difference.

In Brian Street’s work I have found a framework in his theoretical models of literacy that helped me to understand how ideological forces shape specific beliefs about and purposes for literacy. Moving away from a strong text or autonomous model of literacy that privileges the decoding of texts as an unbiased, cognitive action outside of social context, Street offers an ideological model of literacy that views literacy as embedded within cultural and power structures that affect the ways literacy is perceived and used. For Street, literacy, or more precisely, literacy practices “refers to both behaviour and the social and cultural conceptualizations that give meaning to the uses of reading and/or writing” (*Social Literacies* 2).

An “autonomous” model of literacy, Street argues, conceptualizes literacy “in technical terms, treating it as independent of social context, an autonomous variable whose consequences for society and cognition can be derived from its intrinsic character” (*Social Literacies* 5). In comparison, an “ideological” model of literacy is an approach that “signals quite explicitly that literacy practices are aspects not only of ‘culture’ but also of power structures” (*Cross-Cultural Approaches* 7). In addition to providing a method for the structural analysis of literacy practices, what makes Street’s focus on ideology and literacy practices especially useful is the attention to specific contexts and the forces that shape these contexts. By turning to specific contexts and the actions within these contexts, the

“little narratives” of literacy increasingly became the subjects of studies about literacy, especially as told through ethnography, narrative, and story in a variety of media.

While ethnographic studies of literacy in the 1970s (e.g., Scribner and Cole) began to move away from the totalizing narratives of cognitive and social development that characterized work by Goody and Watt and others toward examining language and literacy practices in specific contexts, it was work by Shirley Brice Heath that highlighted the ways that culture and community inform the development and adaptation of these practices by individuals and communities. The significance of Heath’s *Ways with Words* is its focus on the literacy practices of two rural communities within the contexts of these two communities rather than in comparison to some abstraction of literacy and levels of educational achievement. Heath argues that the purposes and forms of literacy can look very different than what we commonly expect in the various uses emphasized and privileged in school (i.e., essayist, literary, critical, or informational). The rich texture of a study like Heath’s provides the depth to studies about literacy that is often lost when grand conclusions about the consequences and power of literacy become more significant than understanding actual practices. Here was a model that helped me to see that studying the use of alternative literacy and language practices did not have to be done in relation to or in comparison with dominant literacy practices, that literacy used in marginalized communities could be studied on its own terms.

Building upon the work of Graff, Street, Heath, and others, studies of literacy have continued in the direction of the social turn, focusing on literacy in clearly defined social and historical contexts, and seeking to examine the uses of literacy by specific groups for specific purposes. In *Intimate Practices: Literacy and Cultural Work in U.S. Women’s Clubs, 1880–1920*, Anne Ruggles Gere examines women’s clubs of the late nineteenth through the early twentieth centuries, arguing that important cultural work through reading and writing took place. Whether it was taking up the political issues of the day or considering matters that were closer to home, Gere argues that women of diverse backgrounds did use literacy for multiple purposes in extracurricular contexts and not simply as extensions of schooled literacy or for personal matters alone. In *Traces of a Stream: Literacy and Social Change Among American Women*, Jacqueline Jones Royster focuses on the literacy and rhetorical practices of nineteenth-century African American women. However, in unpacking and examining these practices and histories, Royster also theorizes and unpacks her own ideologies, examining the complex matrix of race, gender, culture, and the histories that have shaped her own position as a scholar and teacher. And in *Literacy in American Lives*, Deborah Brandt documents and analyzes how a cross section of Wisconsin residents have defined, used, and reshaped the meaning of literacy. Through the development of the concepts of “sponsors of literacy” and the “accumulation” of literacy, Brandt illustrates how these “ordinary” Americans come to acquire and put to use reading and writing, as well as accumulate literacy as a resource that they can draw upon.

NARRATIVES OF SPONSORSHIP

While there are many other important contributions to literacy studies, I have focused on these scholars specifically because they have served as my sponsors: their approaches to literacy have enabled, supported, taught, and modeled not only how to study literacy but also how to be a scholar

of literacy. As a graduate student in the 1990s and then as a young faculty member, I was looking to understand how literacy could be studied to include communities that were often constructed or placed on the margins of literacy. Heath's work illustrated to me how the language and literacy practices of communities of color could be studied to understand purpose and intention rather than studied to explain error and deficit. Graff's articulation of the "literacy myth" and of the "legacies of literacy" and Street's framework of autonomous and ideological models of literacy helped me to question the promise and premise of literacy, to develop a critical understanding of how histories or institutions themselves could be rhetorical and deployed to offer specific narratives about the power of literacy. Royster's historical work on the essayist tradition of African American women helped me to see that writing could be deployed in ways that not only documented the literacy practices of specific communities but also argued for a development of a sense of self and way of knowing shaped by culture, history, and material conditions.

In the work of Anne Ruggles Gere and Deborah Brandt, I have perhaps found my greatest sponsors. As others have been, my work has been shaped by Gere's discussion about the "extracurriculum of composition" and her work on women's clubs and writing groups, illustrating how the social practices of literacy extend beyond institutional spaces and function as a way for self-identified or culturally constructed groups to use writing and reading as a means of action. Or in the case of Brandt, her first book, *Literacy As Involvement*, helped me understand the shift from an understanding of literacy as autonomous, cognitive skill to socially-situated, interactive practice. Her second book, *Literacy in American Lives*, provides some of the key terms of contemporary literacy studies: accumulation, sponsorship, and literacy as resource. We see in *Literacy in American Lives* how literacy works within families, across generations, and what the impact of literacy is on the economic, cultural, and educational conditions of a range of Americans. The scholarly presence of Gere and Brandt in my own work is substantial, but the personal presence of Gere and Brandt in my professional life is what allowed me to understand that I could research the history of literacy in Hawai'i, that I could make an argument about the role literacy plays in the lives of people who are often placed on the margins because of race, culture, language, or others factors that mark them as less-literate or illiterate, or that studying literacy as a socially situated practice is important and critical work that is still often undertheorized and underexamined. Additionally, I have had the fortune to be influenced in personal ways by Harvey Graff and Jacqueline Jones Royster, and continue to return to the work of Brian Street and Shirley Brice Heath, among many others, especially when I teach courses on the study of literacy. What I have been fortunate to experience is an accumulation of literacy, where the generosity of scholars has helped me to develop my own studies of literacy, and has also helped me to understand the importance and value of mentorship in encouraging the next generation of scholars and their work.

In presenting this brief narrative about the sponsorship of literacy studies in one specific case, I hope that I have suggested that not only has our own work been informed by what we might think of as grand narratives of scholarship but also by the little narratives of personal touchstones, whether these are personal connections or more meaningful friendships, to the encouraging comment after a conference presentation, or even citing the work of an emerging scholar. While we may consider our

professional work as studying literacy and perhaps sponsoring the further study of literacy through our research, we should also recognize that we are also sponsoring literacy studies through the personal connections and relationships that develop in our curricular and extracurricular spaces and in the gestures that are often more than a simple act of acknowledgement or kindness.

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