Deborah Brandt on Ghostwriting

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Nancy Linh Karls: I'm Nancy Linh Karls from The Writing Center at the University of Wisconsin Madison, welcoming you to this Writing Center podcast. This podcast series tackles issues of writing in and out of the university. You are about to hear a podcast from our research series which features interviews with outstanding researchers in writing center and rhetoric and composition studies.

Brad Hughes: Hi. I'm Brad Hughes, director of The Writing Center and director of Writing Across the Curriculum at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. I have the pleasure of talking with Deborah Brandt, a colleague in the English Department here at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. She's taught in the English Department here since 1983.

Professor Brandt specializes in composition studies. In particular, she works in literacy studies. She's an award winning teacher and an award winning and very influential scholar in her field. Her most recent book, *Literacy in American Lives* received three wonderful awards, the Mina Shaughnessy Prize from the Modern Language Association, the CCCC's Outstanding Book Award and the Grawemeyer Award in Education from the University of Louisville. Her theoretical and research work have influenced generations of scholars. She's widely known as a wonderful mentor.

Welcome to The Writing Center's Research Podcast, Deb.

01:17 Deborah Brandt: Thanks for inviting me, Brad.

Brad Hughes: I want to start by talking about a recent article that you published. You wrote a wonderful piece that's the lead article in the July 2007 issue of College English, one of the major journals in composition and rhetoric. It's a fascinating exploration of ghostwriting titled, “Who's the President?” Ghostwriting and Shifting Values in Literacy.” I want to start by asking something about that article. First of all, what is a ghostwriter?

Deborah Brandt: I define a ghostwriter very simply. It's an individual who agrees to take on major elements of a writing process and allows someone else to take the credit for it. Not always, but usually, it takes place in some kind of employment arrangement. It's not the same as anonymous writing, but rather, it's an arrangement by which you agree ahead of time to give away your authorship claim to somebody else.
Brad Hughes: How did you get interested in studying ghostwriters?

Deborah Brandt: Like so many things in my work, I really stumbled upon it. I was interviewing writers at work for my new project. I'm really interested in the role of the workplace in stimulating literacy and changing the values that go on around literacy. The way that the workplace has taken up writing in the so-called new economy, the knowledge economy, the information economy.

I was out just interviewing workaday writers from all walks of life—bankers, mortgage brokers, secretaries, government workers, all kinds of folks—and among their duties, as I asked them to enumerate them, they would make allusions to doing ghostwriting. It was not their official title in many cases but they were doing it as part of their work. I became really intrigued by that.

Deborah Brandt: As a result of that, I then went out and interviewed a few more people who did ghostwriting more intensively for a living so that I could explore it a little more. But I was completely taken aback by how much ghostwriting actually goes on in the workplace at different levels and for different reasons. That's how I got into it.

Brad Hughes: So the first people you were interviewing who brought up this kind of work, did they actually use the term ghostwriting?

Deborah Brandt: I think some of them did, yes. Some of them said, "I would write for somebody." Some of them actually volunteered for it. They would be working for particularly writing-challenged boss or have a particularly writing-challenged colleague, and I guess they couldn't stand to see that person suffering or doing things that were getting them or their unit into trouble, and they sort of volunteered to do it.

Other people had it as part of their job description. Government workers, particularly, who wrote speeches and other materials for the people that they worked for. Then I interviewed some freelance writers who just take whatever job comes along. For them, in some cases, that involved ghostwriting.

Brad Hughes: In that article you talk about ghostwriters working in particular domains. What were some of those?

Deborah Brandt: Public relations people. I interviewed a law clerk who ghostwrote legal opinions for a judge. I interviewed a member of a family owned business who just did all the writing for her company. A freelance writer who specialized in doing newsletters for banks, columns, personal columns for the bank president. That column would appear under the name of the president, but that person was ghostwriting his column. So it's a wide range of things. And then other people who would just write letters. I also interviewed a man who volunteered to help members of his immigrant community do the kind of writing that they needed to get along in life.

Brad Hughes: Tell me more about that. What kind of writing was that person helping with?
Deborah Brandt: Many people who are caught up in immigration and citizenship processes, have a lot of correspondence and documentation they have to do with the government. Many people who are in the process of getting resettled have issues with housing, with employment, with benefits, and are just caught up in those big federal and other government bureaucracies that we know so well. Those bureaucracies so much assume a certain level of literacy and fluency with literacy—in English—that far surpasses the abilities of most new immigrants. That is often a source of punishment and disadvantage for people. So he was making his writing skills available as part of community resources, I think. It was something that he could do well, and he made it available to his neighbors.

06:23 Deborah Brandt: We are a document society. We are reliant upon the systems that documents create. I also sometimes wonder whether they are there as potential barriers to people, processes that were made to make opportunities or benefits more difficult. I don't know if that's the case. But it's experienced that way.

Brad Hughes: So the person who is helping in that kind of way, and ghostwriting in that kind of way, was that disrupting or changing or overcoming those barriers?

Deborah Brandt: I think so. I think that's an example of ghostwriting in its most powerful, maybe it's most subversive. That also goes on for people in the legal profession. People who can't afford full legal representation can sometimes hire lawyers who will do their writing for them.

07:25 Deborah Brandt: I think the systems often, because of the meanings that literacy has in our society, the way that it's associated often with intelligence or socialization or law abidingness, that literacy goes along with a sense of entitlement or a sense of deservingness. So if you can't write or you can't write your way into benefits, you can be determined to be less deserving of those benefits. And so that harms people who don't have the skills or don't have the language background.

I think we're always on the lookout for people who are foreign or different or other. And literacy is often used as an indicator for that. So, what was, I thought, so powerful about what this man was doing for his neighbors was he was blunting, at least, if that discrimination was going to occur, he was blunting its effect by lending them his literacy.

08:23 Brad Hughes: How aware was he that that was the effect of what he was doing?

Deborah Brandt: I think that he was. He told me in the interview—he told me particularly about a case he was working with, with someone who was entitled to unemployment benefits and had filled out the paperwork wrong and had ended up not getting covered. He said, "You know, he knew nothing. He knew nothing about the systems that lay behind this paperwork." Which is another thing that I think often educated or middle-class people can understand. They work in these places or they have access to these places. They understand the relationship between a form and a process. And I think that he was very aware that he was lending that knowledge or that background to this person.
Brad Hughes: In the case of the ghostwriters who did their work professionally whom you interviewed for your research, how did they go about doing their work? Did they deliberately try to get inside the head of the person they were writing for or in place of? How did they prep for that?

Deborah Brandt: I think that was one of the findings of this study, how important it was for many of the ghostwriters to feel that they had a sense of that person and were inside their head, inside their values, even inside of their language style. It had something to do with the ethics of what they were doing. When they felt that they had a hold of that person and were acting as that person, they felt ethically authorized. And it also just gave them invention energy to know how to do something that was going to ultimately please their boss. Because a lot of it was a matter of giving the person what they wanted.

Deborah Brandt: Some of them, actually, would tape record the person that they would ghostwrite for. They would take copious notes. They would interview them. They would often go, if they wrote a speech for them, they would go and listen to the speech later on to see if they changed anything or left anything out.

It was really important for them to “get into the head.” And I think that that was a very common phrase that they used, “to get into the head” of the person that they were writing for. And when they weren't able to do that, the ghostwriting became more difficult.

I talked to one man who wrote speeches for a very prominent public figure in Madison. He talked about sitting in the audience and hearing his speech being spoken out by his boss and watching the people around him reacting to the speech and what a strange sensation that was. He was unidentified, he was anonymous in the audience, but he was in fact the author who was able to look around and watch the impact of his work.

Deborah Brandt: That was another interesting thing about the ghostwriters. No matter how much they gave away their writing, no matter how creditless they ultimately became for it, it was still something that they felt responsible toward and something that belonged to them and something they cared about. That was a kind of interesting thing that cannot be given away in authorship. I think the legal aspects of it, the financial aspects of authorship can be given away under the laws that we have, but a different sense of ownership seems connected to the creation and that seemed less able to be given away.

Brad Hughes: The people you interviewed about ghostwriting were pretty aware of all this.

Deborah Brandt: Oh, everybody I interviewed was reflective. Oh! It's just amazing to me how much people can talk about the writing that they do. That's why this is so interesting to me and why I keep at it. Because it's the life of writing that goes on. We spend so many hours at it, talking about ghostwriting, ghostwritten materials, but there's so much writing that's done anonymously as well. It's not exactly the same thing, but it's also where you don't get credit for it.
We run on writing. We're in a sea of writing. And every day there are people out there putting these words together and they have a lot to say about how they do it, why they do it, what impact it has on them, how much care and thought and sweat and often tears go into it. It's a terrific story about mass writing that's completely why I pursue this. My jaw just drops sometimes.

12:46 Deborah Brandt: We think that as writing teachers or theorists of rhetoric that we have a hold of all of that meta knowledge. It's not true. People carry it around with them all the time. They also share it with each other.

Writing in the workplace is sustained in the same ways that writing in a writing center or writing in a writing classroom is done. It's through talk and sharing and support and teaching and learning. It's an intensive activity that goes on around writing in the workplace which was also very eye-opening to me.

Brad Hughes: You've talked about this some, but what would you say, overall, the experiences of ghostwriters tell us about what you call shifting values in literacy? What are your main claims there?

Deborah Brandt: Well, I not only followed this up because I was surprised at the amount of ghostwriting. And, at the same time, there had been a lot of articles in the newspaper about the kind of controversies that go on around ghostwriting.

13:47 Deborah Brandt: But it seems to me that it foregrounded some of the issues that I have been following in general, which is what happens when writing is taken up so wholeheartedly into economic production. And the ways that, in an economic context, all of the values of writing are being exploited. Now, that's not often a nice word, but sort of wrung out for all of its value.

Writing is extremely important to the economy of the United States because it is the basis on which knowledge and information are created, shared, sold. Bought and sold, you know. So, all the values of writing are sort of up for grabs, including, it turns out, in ghostwriting, the value of authorship and the moral and cultural values that we've held toward traditional literacy.

14:48 Deborah Brandt: What's interesting in ghostwriting is that the ghostwriter buys the time of a writer, so they save time and that's very efficient and everything. But they also buy the prestige of authorship itself which has been associated traditionally with the person who sits and does the hard work of writing. These things are separated out in the act of ghostwriting and so I was able to follow what happens to them.

It turns out that, I think, the new system of exploitation of writing is depending on the old-fashioned idea of the old-fashioned writer even while these processes are undermining and changing that figure. We're in a situation now, where, more and more, it doesn't really matter who wrote the words, we can't really tell, and yet we depend on a reader valuing and attributing the words to an author in order for those words to have value. I think we're in a
really ironic situation and I don't know what's going to happen about it.

15:58  Brad Hughes: Thank you so much, Deb, for talking about your research on ghostwriting.

Deborah Brandt: I enjoyed it a lot, Brad. Thank you.

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Nancy Linh Karls: Thanks for joining us for this podcast in our research series. To learn more about the UW Madison Writing Center, visit our website at wisc.edu/writing. And if you're a currently enrolled UW Madison student, you can give us a call at 608-263-1992. We'll schedule an appointment so you can meet with a Writing Center instructor to discuss any feature of writing.

I'm Nancy Linh Karls for the UW Madison Writing Center wishing you happy writing.

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