“Writers Are Becoming Many”: Deborah Brandt on Her Current Research

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[Intro Music]

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’re about to hear a podcast from our research series, which features interviews with outstanding researchers in the Writing Center and Rhetoric and Composition studies.

Deborah Brandt: Writing was always connected to work. It was always connected to commercial life. It was always connected to production. And it was much more dangerous.

Brad Hughes: That’s Deborah Brandt, Professor of Composition and Rhetoric in the English Department at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, describing a key difference between the history of reading and the history of writing in the United States. In this nine-minute podcast, Professor Brandt discusses her latest research project.

I’m Brad Hughes, Director of the Writing Center and Director of Writing Across the Curriculum at the University of Wisconsin. Welcome to the Writing Center’s research podcast, Deb.

01:00 Deborah Brandt: Thanks for inviting me, Brad.

Brad Hughes: In our last podcast we discussed your recent article about ghostwriting and shifting values of literacy. The ghostwriting piece is part of a larger research project of yours, in which you’re tracking the rising importance of writing as a mass skill in the United States. Would you tell us more about that project that you’re working on now?

Deborah Brandt: What’s important is that writing has a whole different history in our society than reading to us. It didn’t come through the same institutions and through the same social values as reading. Reading was very connected to religion. It was very connected to people’s roles as participants in nation-building and assimilation into the society. That was what reading was for.
Writing was always connected to work. It was always connected to commercial life. It was always connected to production. And it was much more dangerous. Writing never really participated in that aspects of religion, assimilation, citizen, nation-building and so on, it existed outside.

So, what this new work is doing is tracing the rise of writing. The role of writing intensity in people’s lives, but also we’re trying to point out how different it is from reading. And how, perhaps as a nation in our institutions, our schools and even in our government and in our policies, we have not really made way for a writing literacy—what it might mean to be scribal citizens.

We have always assumed that writers would be few and readers would be many. But there’s lots of evidence now that writers are becoming many. And this work is trying to document that process and also ask us as a people: are we ready ideologically and institutionally, for this change? And I think a lot of the tensions that are going on around—intellectual property around the world, the Internet, around the commercialization of the Internet—have to do with these problems. And so I’m trying to see them not simply as technology problems but as problems in the history of literacy.

Brad Hughes: You talked about what it might mean to be scribal citizens. What does that mean?

Deborah Brandt: Writers has been less protected by the government than readers. As readers and consumers, we have had rights. In fact, our first amendment rights principally have to do with our right to have access to information. As writers in the workplace for instance, we are often much more surveilled and controlled because we are writing things that are for citizens or for consumers.

[Laughter]

So, it was always assumed, of course, that writers would be a few people, and then there would be these massive readers. And so the government is protecting the readers. But now, we are also the writers. These protections are out of balance. We do not have a heritage of writing rights for the masses, that’s one thing.

We also have a view that our characters are formed, our values are formed through reading. We don’t have any accounts at all of how writing might be serving that process. This came through to me in the National Endowment for the Arts' recent study called “Reading at Risk.” And it bemoaned that the precipitous decline in reading, particularly in literary reading in the United States, and particularly among the young people. That’s going down very fast.

Just a little footnote in that study that suggests that writing and particularly creative writing, has increased 30% since the last survey. They didn’t try to explain that, they didn’t try to incorporate that. And yet they bemoaned the lack of reading, they thought it was going to mean a decline in our democracy, decline in our civilization—because you cannot be a human, cannot develop without reading, and particularly reading literature.

They could not conceive that the writing the people were doing could be functioning in the
same way. And that the reading that they are doing could be in the service of the writing that they’re doing. And yet I believe that that’s what’s happening. We are becoming a nation of writers.

**Brad Hughes:** Would you talk some of the methods that you're using for your current project to track document arising, importance of writing as a mass skill in the United States?

**Deborah Brandt:** I’m trying to do it historically first. And just to go back to some of the early foundations of mass reading and mass writing in this country, and how they were being sponsored, and how they were disseminated, to point out how differently they have been sponsored in our society, carrying it through the twentieth century, and the economic changes that began to favor production and the productive side of literacy. So, I’m using a lot of historical sources.

06:11 I’m also looking at how the law has protected and defended reading, principally in the form of protecting citizens and consumers. And how it has protected writers and how differently they are. How the law controls and surveils readers versus how it controls and surveils writers. So, I’m doing a kind of a legal contrast between reading and writing, historical contrast, economic contrast.

And then with the interviews that I’m doing, I’m interviewing sixty workaday writers who have been in the workplace from 1960 until now. Going back through the work histories of their families but concentrating on their own work histories. To track the shifting relationships between reading and writing, the growing writing intensity in their lives as they experience it in the workplace, as well as the impact that that has on their reading and writing outside of work, and the impact had that has on their families’ reading and writing. So, it’s a combination of methods that I’m using.

07:21 **Brad Hughes:** Sounds like an incredibly ambitious project. How are you feeling about it?

**Deborah Brandt:** Well, it’s taken me a long time. I’ve been thinking and thinking about this since I finished my earlier book in 2001. And it’s just been an inkling for me, like many people, you know it’s there. You can’t leave it alone. It keeps nagging at you. You keep trying to get it. I think I have it conceptually under control. But I still have a lot of work to do.

[Laughter]

**Brad Hughes:** Thank you so much Deb, for talking about your new research.

**Deborah Brandt:** Brad, I appreciate the opportunity. Thank you.

[Music]

08:01 **Nancy Linh Karls:** Thanks for joining us, for this podcast in our research series. To learn more about University of Wisconsin-Madison Writing Center, visit our website at
And if you’re currently enrolled, University of Wisconsin-Madison’s student, you can give us a call at 608-263-1992. We’ll schedule an appointment so you can meet with the Writing Center instructor to discuss any feature of writing.

I’m Nancy Linh Karls, University of Wisconsin-Madison Writing Center. Wishing you happy writing.

[Ending Music]