Deborah Brandt on *Literacy in American Lives*

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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 Writing Center and Rhetoric Composition Studies.

**Brad Hughes:** I’m Brad Hughes, Director of the Writing Center and Director of Writing Across the Curriculum at the University of Wisconsin. In this 13-minute podcast, we’ll hear from Deborah Brandt, a renowned Professor of Composition and Rhetoric in the English Department of the University of Wisconsin at Madison.

Welcome to the Writing Center’s research podcast, Deb.

**Deborah Brandt:** Thanks for inviting me, Brad.

**Brad Hughes:** In this podcast, Professor Brandt reflects on her book, *Literacy in American Lives*. This book won three of the highest possible awards, the Mina Shaughnessy Award from the Modern Language Association, the CCCC’s Best Book Award and the Grawemeyer Award in Education from the University of Louisville.

Later in this podcast, Professor Brandt reflects on literacy studies more generally on her teaching. And then some of the values that got her scholarly writing. Would you tell us a bit about, *Literacy in American Lives*, which was published in 2001? What would you say that book was about?

**Deborah Brandt:** That was about the changing conditions for literacy learning across the twentieth century as it was experienced in the lives, again, of ordinary people. That’s a very important aspect of this. I really want to understand broad-based experience and diverse experience. So, I interviewed 80 people born between 1895 and 1985 and collected their accounts of how they remember how they learned to read and how they learned to write beginning from their earliest memories to the present day.

And out of that work, I was able to track what I came to call the “sponsors of literacy”—those agents that seemed to be hovering around the scenes of literacy learning, who had an
interest in literacy learning. Who supported it, recruited it, in some cases suppressed it, exploited it—wanted it.

02:17 The people that were interested in our literacy learning as we are, and they’re not yet with--far beyond the school. And were just so many sponsors and: how that those constellations of sponsors shifted across the century; how they contributed to stratification in literacy opportunity; how they contributed to the ideological congestion that surrounds literacy learning; why the standard keep rising; why expectations keep rising? And I just try to tell that story of literacy learning. It was in the course of that that the economic aspects really started to appear to me and that’s what I’ve returned to now in this new project.

03:05 Brad Hughes: You said there are a lot of sponsors not associated with school or with education in traditional senses. What were some of those?

Deborah Brandt: Some really old traditional ones which would be religions, the military, social and civil rights organizations. Lots and lots of commercial product makers, media, toys, writing utensils, and the people that brought that those sorts of things in. Peers, therapists, prison systems. Lots and lots of people stimulate our literacy. Make use of our literacy. And when they need to compete themselves, compete on the grounds of our literacy for advantage. And that’s what makes literacy learning in the twentieth century and continuing particularly in the twenty-first century, so turbulent and so rapidly changing. Because literacy really is so valuable and we have so many people interested in it. We as individual literacy learners have to learn under those conditions and they can be quite intense and hairy at times.

[Laughter]

04:15 Brad Hughes: Your ideas in that book had been really influential in the field of literacy studies and in composition and rhetoric more broadly. How does it feel to have your ideas taken up as frequently as they are by other scholars and researchers?

Deborah Brandt: You know, I had no idea and it was kind of a surprise to me. But I always enjoy seeing how people interpret and make use of the work. I have read book reviews that have reflected back to me what I was doing and kind of giving me a sharper idea about that and I love that. I’ve been contacted by students who have used the work, who have been inspired to collect their own literacy stories or do analyses of their families or of their regions. That’s all very rewarding.

05:07 And then also, I’m waiting for these ideas to be overtaken and challenged or improved upon, or repudiated maybe someday. So, I guess it’s a great thrilling opportunity to be part of that process of coming to understand literacy in deeper and better ways.

Brad Hughes: I asked a couple of your former students who study literacy to post a question for you. And one of them, Rhea Lathan, who’s now an Assistant Professor at Michigan State University, wanted to ask about the implications of your research for teaching: are there some?
Deborah Brandt: All of my research to me has impacts on my teaching. It has to do with consciousness. [Laughter] And you can’t put hundreds of people’s stories about how they learned to write into your head and not have it affect how you come to understand writing and how you interact with your students.

06:11 I, as a result of my research particularly, have been working with undergraduates in a course called, “Writing in a Changing World,” where we foreground these very issues of what it means to be becoming a member of the “writing class” because college graduates are the people who write for the society. And in so doing, become decision-makers, gatekeepers, advocates, government leaders. They really have a handle on the power of the society. How do you handle that opportunity responsibly? Also, they’re going to be the people who have their literacy most exploited by the people who need literacy. They’re going to be hired writers.

07:00 So, we spend a lot of time talking about what that means for them, what that has to do with their language choices; how they can think about expanding their sensitivity to audiences or to constituents that they might write for; how they need to be open to the language diversity of their society; and, how that can get into their writing.

We just did another fascinating unit on Facebook. Kids are writing under conditions that we couldn’t imagine! Where you’re conducting these very sensitive social relationships with peers or potential mates and so on. And doing it in an atmosphere where potentially anybody in the world can be reading your writing. I don’t know about you but when I was writing letters to my friends when I was in college or letters to boyfriends, I wasn’t having to think about the world looking in, or a potential employer looking in, or somebody in the future looking in. [Laughter]

08:06 So, how do you write under these circumstances? And so that was a direct influence of the research on my teaching. I’m having a good time with them and they’re ready to talk about it.

Brad Hughes: Another former student of yours, John Duffy, who’s an Associate Professor at Notre Dame, wanted me to ask: what’s the future of literacy studies? And they went on the say more specifically: o you believe it’s productive to study literacy at all? If a focus on literacy isolates it from larger shaping influences, the class ideology gender and so forth?

Deborah Brandt: Right. These have been the big emphasis in literacy studies: that you cannot take literacy independently. It’s always going to be deeply implicated in social processes, social structures, identity formation, politics, power, ideology. And when you look at it that way it can sort of just disappear into those processes of itself. It often doesn’t count for much. But this is what I would say to John.

[Laughter]

09:10 You could say that can’t really understand the heart outside of a human body. Everything about it has to do with where it is and what it does in the body but there’s still heart
specialists. And so I think of myself as a writing specialist and a literacy specialist. And we will always going to have a special interest in that aspect and I think it’s worth paying attention to it.

**Brad Hughes:** As I read your writing I always see at it as consistently rich and deep with ideas, insights, theories, but also simultaneously clear and accessible. And therefore inviting to lots of different kinds of audiences, it’s a pleasure to read. How do you manage that? And are there choices that you’re making as a research writer that lead readers to like it and that kind of length?

**Deborah Brandt:** First of all Brad, thanks for these kind words. It’s very nice of you to say that.

10:03 I guess I spend a lot of time actually working that out. Being clear and accessible is actually a value of mine. There’s a lot of thinking, there’s a lot of reading. I spend hours and hours analyzing the interviews and trying to understand what they’re saying to me. How we can see literacy moving through the lives of people. And then I try to tell it in a way that it’s accessible. I don’t know how, I don’t know what deliberate choices...

**Brad Hughes:** Let me ask you of a background as a journalist. Does that have something to do with this?

**Deborah Brandt:** It probably did. I started out as a young person writing for a local newspaper and had my community in mind when I wrote. And so I got a lot of practice in that. But I do think that sometimes the academic institution puts the pressure and particularly puts the pressure on young writers or graduate student writers to have to sound a certain way. And to kind of prove that you belong to this exclusive club.

11:16 And I would say that I’ve tried to resist that and I do find that some of the best academic writers, some of the writers that are most influential in academia are also accessible and clear writers. They’re certainly the academic writers I seek out as a reader. And I tried not to be intimidated or coerced by that idea that we have to write in esoteric way.

I also collect the accounts of people who aren't academics for the most part. And try to keep the ways of life and the values toward language present in that writing. So, it’s a kind of an allegiance to research subjects, as well as participants.

12:12 **Brad Hughes:** Thank you so much Deb, for talking about your book Literacy in American Lives.

**Deborah Brandt:** It’s been a lot of fun, Brad. Thanks for the chance.

[Music]

**Nancy Linh Karls:** Thanks for joining us for this podcast in our research series. To learn more about the University of Wisconsin-Madison Writing Center, visit our website at
wisc.edu/writing.

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 from the University of Wisconsin-Madison Writing Center, wishing you, happy writing!

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