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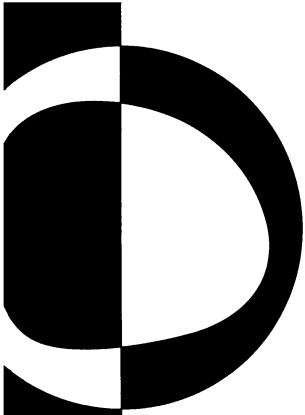
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Review: Mass Literacy and Writing Centers: Deborah Brandt's *The Rise of Writing*

We believe that every writing center director should read a new book by noted literacy scholar Deborah Brandt, best known for her award-winning *Literacy in American Lives* (2001) and for her influential concept of “sponsors of literacy.” In her new book, *The Rise of Writing: Redefining Mass Literacy* (2015), Brandt draws from interviews with a diverse group of nearly one hundred “workaday” writers from all walks of life to give a richly theorized portrait of the writing that people do outside of school—both in the workplace and on their own. At first glance, claiming that this book is so important for writing centers may seem hyperbolic, especially when the book does not address writing centers directly. But we are convinced that Brandt’s research has a great deal to offer all of us in this field, for two main reasons.

First, when interest in the humanities is declining among university students and when digital composition is changing the nature of writing, it is easy to worry, at least a little, about the future of alphabetic writing and of writing instruction. After reading Brandt’s new book, we may still worry about many things—but we do *not* fear that writing is in decline. As her title promises, Brandt persuades us that writing is on the

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rise, that “[m]illions of Americans now engage in creating, processing, and managing written communications as a major aspect of their work” (p. 3). Drawing from her in-depth research, Brandt observes that “many American adults... spend 50 percent or more of the workday with their hands on keyboards and their minds on audiences...” (p. 3). Brandt’s research also shows that *talk about writing* is ubiquitous: In work and in leisure, there is more peer-to-peer engagement among writers than ever before. These findings offer powerful justifications for emphasizing writing instruction in universities, and they offer special justifications for what we in writing centers do so well. As Brandt herself explains,

Mass literacy is evolving quickly from a base in reading to a base in writing. Writing centers are one of the few sites in the entire educational system that recognize and support this important cultural change. They make the human activity of writing visible and alive. They allow the skills and knacks of writing to pass person to person, and they teem with the kind of talk that all writers need to develop. As I visited workplaces and met with people who explained how they did their writing and how they learned to do it, I was amazed at how closely their explanations synched up with the values and routines of writing centers. Writing centers are the workshops of a new mass literacy. (Deborah Brandt, personal communication, January 6, 2016)

The second reason we are so enthusiastic about Brandt’s research is that we are convinced our field needs big new ideas. Too often, our field has a surprisingly limited vision of the role of writing and reading within writing center work. All three of us value the familiar theories underpinning writing center studies, regularly invoking them as we conceptualize, describe, and defend what we do in writing centers. But our field needs new theories, new ways of thinking about what we do, and we see Brandt’s argument about the current state of mass literacy as a call to action. Our culture’s new, intensive focus on writing has transformed literacy itself, Brandt argues, from a reading-based literacy to a writing-based literacy—a shift that “requires expanding what we typically associate with or attribute to literacy by displacing reading as the defining experience and thinking about what is unique to writing experiences in comparison to reading experiences” (p. 128). Brandt’s provocative arguments provide us with new ways to think about our work as readers of writers’ work-in-progress. At the same time, however, Brandt’s explanation of workplace writing raises questions about how we educate tutors, how we need to educate various audiences about

21st-century writing, and how we can change our centers to meet the important needs of writers whom we currently neglect. In this review, we will explore first the good news for writing centers and then the more provocative challenges raised by *The Rise of Writing*.

The Rise of Writing

Brandt's book grows out of her extensive interview data, gathered over the course of seven years. Between 2005 and 2012, she conducted one-to-two-hour individual interviews with a diverse group of 90 people drawn from a broad range of economic, racial, and cultural groups, between the ages of 15 and 80, "who use writing regularly in their vocations and avocations" (p. 4). Thirty of those interviews were with full-time government employees (in all three branches of government); thirty more were with young adults, ages 15 to 25 "who said they engaged in regular, substantive writing outside of school... or professed a preference for writing over reading" (p. 94). Using methods of grounded theory, Brandt coded the interview transcripts line-by-line to develop theories about contemporary mass literacy. Her book presents powerful arguments that transcend any one story but are exemplified through a series of compelling accounts.

Her central finding, as we have already indicated, is that there has been a profound shift in the nature of literacy. "For perhaps the first time in the history of mass literacy," Brandt argues, "writing seems to be eclipsing reading as the literate experience of consequence" (p. 3). If literacy was once the ability to read texts written *by* distant authors, literacy is now about reading to write texts *with* fellow writers. And that is in part because many times now when people are reading, they are reading texts that they need to write a response to—more than they are reading works written by distant authors whom they will never meet.

Another important line of argument focuses on the experiences of what Brandt calls "workaday" writers—civil servants, police officers, scientists, ghostwriters, and others who write on a daily basis as part of their work but who do so anonymously and thus receive neither the credit, freedoms, or autonomy associated with authorship. Brandt argues that, despite the legal mechanisms of copyright and work-for-hire rulings, which deny such work the prestige and privileges of authorship, workaday writers "routinely reported having aesthetic, intellectual, ethical, and political experiences during acts of workaday writing" (p. 27). Brandt considers this intellectual and emotional engagement with workplace writing "the residue of authorship, a value that can be neither separated from their person nor accounted for in any legal or economic

sense” (p. 27). Those residues of authorship suggest how poorly the current legal mechanisms, which were designed to define and control intellectual property, account for the realities of workaday writers.

Finally, Brandt argues, it’s not just our legal institutions that are ill-suited to valuing the experience of mass authorship. Schools tend to privilege students’ development as readers over their development as writers: “Reading is thought to shape character and intellect, and provide the wisdom and worldliness that make one worthy to write. In every way, reading is treated as the well from which writing springs” (p. 89). However, Brandt demonstrates that there are pockets of students who identify themselves as writers—of fiction, of slam poetry, of journalism—and that school structures are often not congenial to their priorities and behaviors. Indeed Brandt uses the phrase *writing over reading* to make visible the ways in which these students prioritized writing over reading and “pursued their orientations to writing in instructional and other social contexts where they were being construed (along with everybody else) as readers” (p. 96). In this way, Brandt not only upends commonsense thinking about the relationship between reading and writing, she also points towards an institutional analysis of the ways that schools may be discouraging the mass literacy of writing over reading—even as forces outside the academy have already moved beyond the old reading-based literacy.

Writing Centers as the Workshops of a New Mass Literacy

Brandt’s new book offers several powerful 21st-century justifications for the work that writing centers do and new ways to conceptualize that work. First, Brandt’s focus on how much time workers are spending writing in their jobs can help writing center directors to justify and to interest others in what we do in writing centers. It is one thing to justify writing centers by gesturing, as the three of us often do, toward our students’ professional futures, asserting that no matter which fields our students work in, our graduates will have to communicate with multiple audiences about complex topics for varied purposes. It is another thing entirely to be able to cite and to use examples from Brandt’s findings that writing is a central, complex component of all kinds of professions and avocations. For instance, in her chapter “Writing for the State,” Brandt offers case studies of a police officer who describes writing his incident reports as if he were writing a movie and who gets the “satisfaction of telling... this other person’s story in a way that is usable for that district attorney, in a way that is usable for the command staff who has to review it, a detective to follow up on it, and the jury who has to decide” (p. 60);

an environmental science writer who describes her writing as “just there to provide data” (p. 67) but who must write about mercury pollution and other politically charged environmental issues; and a social policy analyst writing as a liaison between state and tribal governments whose hierarchies do not sync neatly (pp. 64–67). Although workplace writing is often seen as formulaic and routine, Brandt’s case studies affirm that workplace writing requires practiced, situation-specific attention to audience and purpose; we believe writing centers have an important role to play in helping writers prepare for the nuanced demands of workplace writing.

Second, writing center directors should be thrilled to learn how common it is for workers in all kinds of occupations to talk with others about workplace writing-in-progress. As Brandt demonstrates, “Reviewing other people’s workplace writing is a ubiquitous practice, whether as a formal job responsibility or as an informal favor extended to colleagues, supervisors, or even in some cases friends and family members” (p. 143). Indeed, many of the comments in Brandt’s interviews sound as if they come from writing center peer tutors. The writers Brandt interviewed describe

- setting aside their personal biases and feelings to serve the organization as a whole
- working on projects about which they don’t have particular disciplinary knowledge but that they learn about through the process of writing
- working with writers to help the writers articulate themselves more clearly and effectively
- assessing other writers’ needs and tailoring feedback not only to the writers’ drafts but also to the writers as individuals with particular temperaments and feelings about their work

In many ways, workaday writers’ experiences with peer review affirm one of the messages of the Peer Writing Tutor Alumni Research Project (Hughes, Gillespie, & Kail, 2010): that undergraduate peer tutors’ experiences do transfer—in a variety of ways—into their work in life after college.

Brandt’s research makes clear that this talk about writing is anything but simple. Because it involves challenging rhetorical situations, individual identities, promotions and rewards, and power relationships, talk about writing in the workplace is as complex as it is common:

[T]he intense care that must be taken with written products in many information-based and service-based organizations brings high-stakes scrutiny, talk, teaching, and learning about writing into the course of the routine workday. Supervisors often have formal responsibility for developing the writing skills of their staffs, even as reviewing, editing, and feedback go on informally as well. Writing texts collaboratively can throw people into direct engagement with other people's writing habits and language styles, heightening awareness of their own. Engaging with others through mutual or reciprocal acts of writing enriches conceptions and knowledge about the craft of writing and the diversity of individual style while encouraging identifications with, distinctions between, and judgments toward other writing people. (p. 145)

Brandt's description of workplace culture profoundly strengthens our arguments that the deep, extended talk about writing that goes on constantly in writing centers prepares students in essential ways for professional life. The workplaces of the people Brandt interviews are full of complex rhetorical challenges (can a bacteriologist write objectively about the facts of PCB presence in streams near power plants?) and existential questions (is a government worker also a citizen when she writes, if she effectively abrogates her freedom of speech?). A clear implication of the book is that people need to learn how to talk about writing in order to navigate these challenges with their workplace colleagues. Undergraduate writing consultants, writing fellows, and graduate tutors learn to engage in that kind of talk. But we believe they are not the only ones learning how to talk about writing. By participating in tutorials, student-writers hear an interested reader's critical take on their drafts and learn about many dimensions of academic writing; they also hear encouragement and get help with the affective dimension of writing (see Harris, 1995; Thompson, 2009). If they participate in more sustained writing center conversations, student-writers also learn how to talk about their own writing. And as they do that they are learning how to talk about the writing of others.

Realigning Our Priorities in a New Age of Mass Literacy

For writing center professionals, one way of reading Brandt's findings is to congratulate ourselves on how well the mission and methods of writing centers align with the 21st-century workplace and then to capitalize on the job-readiness skills that our peer tutors develop, trumpeting those in order to justify our programs and to seek more funding. And we

are convinced that we should do both of these things. But Brandt's book challenges as well as affirms the work of writing centers. Specifically, her findings should push us to find ways to educate students, tutors, colleagues, university leaders, and alumni about 21st-century workplace writing and about the ways that writing center work aligns with the contemporary workplace; her findings should prod us to look critically at our tutor education, in order to consider whether it may inadvertently be training our peer tutors to be excellent functionaries in a world that does not value or respect what they bring; and her findings should press us to create exciting new programs, ones aligned with an age of mass writing, and to think more deeply about social justice, in order to reach writers on our campuses who are usually invisible to writing centers.

As exciting and relevant as Brandt's research may be, one fundamental challenge involves learning how to share those findings effectively with key audiences. Brandt's findings that writing and talk about writing are ubiquitous in the contemporary workplace will not do writing centers any good if we do not find ways to communicate these facts in memorable ways to student-writers, to prospective and current tutors, and to colleagues, administrative leaders, alumni and other key stakeholders in our universities. While these audiences may have noted the shift to writing as the dominant form of literacy, they may perceive the changes in literacy as a crisis, rather than as an opportunity for universities and workplaces to re-envision themselves. So it's part of our job, then, to find—following Harris (2010)—memorable ways to communicate those facts as we discuss our centers, and we need to choose frames for describing the center that communicate the centrality of talk about writing in life after graduation for our students.

As we look within our writing centers, Brandt's research also challenges us to think critically about our tutor education programs. Given how complicated collaborative writing is in the workplace, we have an obligation to create opportunities for tutors to talk about the complex roles they play in generating ideas and texts together with student writers. What awaits peer writing tutors beyond graduation are not only professional workplaces with lots of writing and talk about writing, but also workplaces where texts are composed within complex matrices of power, where writing often looks less like collaboration and more like ghostwriting. Employees with strong writing skills are often required to do high-stakes writing for demanding supervisors and audiences. The writers whom Brandt interviewed depict their peer-writing-tutor-like roles more negatively than peer tutors might. Here are a few observations from workaday writers about what they do as writers for their employers:

- I create “an improved version of her [my employer]” (pp. 34, 50).
- I am “saying what he would say if he knew what he was talking about” (p. 34).
- “That’s my job, to take what’s in their head and pull it through a process so the words work and somebody reading it says, yeah, that Bob’s a great guy” (p. 36).

These characterizations of the writer-employer relationship depict what Brandt calls the “transactional flow within employee-employer relations” (p. 37), a largely unidirectional flow of ideas from employer to employee, in which the writing employee listens but rarely innovates except, perhaps, to subtly refine the ideas of the employer—people who, in Brandt’s words “need more writing talent than they possess themselves” (p. 38).

This unidirectional flow is most evident in those instances when employers choose to exercise their power by distancing themselves from the writing—or even the writers. One person in Brandt’s study reports, “If it [the writing] doesn’t sound like him [my supervisor], if it doesn’t sound like something he wants to say, he’ll often ignore it completely or if he does use it, he’ll make it fairly plain that he didn’t write it” (p. 37). Or another ghostwriter comments: “One of the senators fired all four of his staff last Christmas, right near last Christmas, because they were trying to tell him what to do. And in part they were trying to do that through the writing and he would have none of that” (p. 37). In these cases, Brandt notes that “Control was asserted not by taking ownership of the writing but by re-separating from the ghostwriter and demoting the writing” (p. 37). Writing in these scenarios is not an elevated task; it is a menial task, from which those in power make strong efforts to separate themselves.

Just as Brandt’s book suggests to us that writing tutors may readily transfer the skills they have learned into the workplace, Brandt also makes clear—through her accounts of writing for hire and creating improved versions of people whose values our (former) tutors may not share—that such work is not without complication. As we prepare writing tutors to work in our centers, are we sufficiently preparing them to understand the complexities of workplaces, to advocate for themselves, and to gain credit where credit is due? Given that writing centers emphasize the ways tutors collaborate with writers, rather than ghostwrite for them, we inevitably de-emphasize the role writing tutors play in shaping the content of student writing. Our approach fails to give us ways to recognize the creative and intellectual work that tutors

do within conferences—and may position our tutors to not recognize or advocate for their own creative abilities within the workplace. In writing centers as in workplaces, writing tutors struggle with papers that represent viewpoints they can't support. They struggle with ethical issues when they read inadequate citations of sources. Even though writing centers typically don't present writing tutors as "authors," tutors often struggle with the content of the papers students bring to the center. In all of these cases, tutors feel a residue of authorship, a sense of responsibility, not only for the writers with whom they work but also for the ideas expressed on the page.

How can we recognize the role of the tutor in the development of ideas? Can we—should we—open up conversations with tutors and with our campuses about giving tutors a byline on the papers that students submit after meeting with a peer tutor? Alternately, should we talk with tutors in unsentimental ways about the complex experiences of authorship they will likely encounter in the workplace? On the one hand, our nurturing, collaborative ideals may help our peer tutors to bring change to workplaces that are inherently not designed for enhancing human potential. How can we foster their roles not only as writing tutors but as change agents? On the other hand, when they are entry-level employees, they are unlikely to possess enough power to alter the unspoken rules of the game. In either case, by opening up conversations with tutors about the complexities of collaboration, we can help tutors push their thinking beyond idealized understandings of how their tutoring experience will translate to the work world, and we can help them prepare to avoid having their work as writers and collaborators exploited by others.

But it's not only the professional futures of our tutors that Brandt challenges us to grapple with; the stories of Brandt's respondents remind us again and again that workplaces are fundamentally oriented toward profit for the elite few. Reading Brandt's book makes us ask ourselves what obligation we have within this changing literacy environment to reinvent ourselves within elite institutions that have historically supported mass *reading* to make them into *writing* places, where writers work, share, and talk with other writers. As Brandt explains, all kinds of institutions—libraries, religious institutions, publishers, and especially schools, for example—have existed in order to develop and support readers. The accounts that Brandt tells of "writing-oriented youth" who are writing outside of school and are building relationships around writing

demonstrate the radical possibilities of a writing-based literacy, a literacy in which reading would primarily serve writing by serving the lives and development of those who write. It would be a literacy in which, to quote Otto Rivlin, everyone would get a driver's license. It would be a literacy in which institutions originally organized around mass readerships, like publishing houses or libraries, would maintain communities of writers and connect writers with others writers at every age. (p. 126)

It's easy to imagine extending Brandt's transformative vision of literacy to include writing centers—reinventing centers as studios and stages and workshops, where writers meet and work and share and inspire others.

Brandt's book offers a model of this kind of informal learning. As she conducted her research, Brandt took a special interest in how people get the resources and the resilience to stake their claim as writers. After all, Brandt points out, "Learning to read is an expectation and a rite of passage for children in this society. But the idea of *being* or *becoming* a writer has more profound aspirational power" (p. 98), in large part because "permission to be a writer is more hard-won than permission to be a reader" (p. 100). What Brandt found, particularly in her interviews with young writers, was the crucial importance of mentorship. Invoking the centuries-old figure of writing masters who (when paper and ink were a rare and difficult technology) taught others "how to hold the head, the elbow, the hand, how to whittle pens and blot mistakes" (p. 105), Brandt is particularly interested in how the historical figure of the writing master has evolved into role models for contemporary young writers very much in need of support and inspiration as they "write over" reading. Contemporary writing masters include relatives who inspire, teachers who model behaviors as "active practitioners of the craft of writing" (p. 106), and published authors who give readings and sign books. In all these cases, writing masters—whether in a crucial moment, or over weeks, even years—offer their individual attention and encouragement, recognizing these young writers as writers.

Certainly, some university- and school- and community-based writing centers have already cultivated spaces where writers work alongside each other in mentoring relationships, producing and sharing writing and multimodal projects in what are often called studios. And the three writing centers we work with have all moved in some of the directions that Brandt sees for the future of literacy, sponsoring more events like International Write-Ins, weekly writing groups, writer's retreats, and dissertation camps. But it's useful to recognize these kinds of innovations as part of a larger historical change in literacy and to

envision the kinds of programs and spaces writing centers could be as part of “writing-first” institutions in schools and universities.

While we are imagining and creating the future of our writing centers, Brandt’s book challenges writing programs and writing centers to engage more with social justice for often-forgotten members of our universities. Late in the book, Brandt makes a damning observation about the inequity in how writing instruction and resources are allocated *within our universities*. With her always sharp critical eye, she notes that writing programs—and universities as a whole—ignore the university staff or workers who most need our help and instruction in order to prepare for the literacy demands of the 21st century workplace:

Just as workplaces are formidable sites of literacy production, they are formidable sites for the production of literacy inequalities . . . I write this from the grounds of a public university, where the ongoing literacy development of enrolled students and employed faculty is generously supported through the provision of space, material, equipment, workshops, consultations, and technical assistance of every kind and at nearly every hour of any day. But by policy and practice, service workers on campus are excluded from such supports for their literacy, with ramifications for them and their children. (p. 165)

As we think about Brandt’s indictment and exhortation, we recognize that many writing centers have made positive steps in this direction. At our own separate institutions, our writing centers sponsor community writing assistance programs (Brad), collaborations with area high schools (Julie and Rebecca), and occasional programming geared to staff (Rebecca). But we also recognize that we have not worked hard enough or had the imagination or the values to propose doing more not only for the white-collar, 9–5 staff on our own campuses, but also for service workers more broadly who, as Brandt argues, most need more writing instruction and assistance for their current jobs and to advance in their careers. Other writing centers may already have figured out ways to meet this important need, but for us and for our colleagues in our writing centers, it’s a real challenge to fulfill our mission to current students AND to do something more socially progressive with our community of university workers and larger city community. We could simply excuse ourselves by saying that we don’t have enough time or staff to do yet more, but as Anne Geller, Michele Eodice, Frankie Condon, Meg Carroll, & Elizabeth H. Boquet (2007) remind us when they urge writing center directors to take up anti-racism work in their

writing centers: “Here’s a hard truth: Laments about a lack of time are never simply about a lack of time. They are statements about priorities. They are expressions of fear. They mask concerns about exposing inadequacies” (p. 91). Although it’s an uncomfortable indictment of our current practices and missions, Brandt’s criticism is one we take to heart.

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