

Project 1: Literacy Narrative

Background: In her essay “Sponsors of Literacy,” Deborah Brandt finds that our development as readers and writers (and what we think about these activities) is tied to what she calls “literacy sponsors.” These sponsors, in Brandt’s words, are “any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold literacy--and gain advantage by it in some way” (166). Brandt’s theory of literacy sponsorship is useful for the way it allows us to see how individuals (e.g., parents, teachers*, employers) as well as broader economic forces (e.g., the development of new technologies or changes in labor markets) shape our histories as readers and writers. You will further examine literacy sponsorship by writing your own *literacy narrative* --a reflective, personal essay about particular events, texts, and persons that have impacted your literacy practices.

Assignment: Drawing upon Brandt’s article, write a literacy narrative that reconstructs **one moment** in your literacy history when a particular sponsor influenced your development as a reader and/or writer in an important way. Your audience is your classmates. Besides providing a vivid, detailed account of this episode, your narrative should analyze what impact this sponsor had on your literacy development and what the sponsor’s motivations were.

Or, if you prefer, you may focus on a time when **you** sponsored another individual’s literacy in a significant way. If you write about yourself as a literacy sponsor, discuss what impact *you* had on this other individual’s literacy development and what *your* motivations were.

Tips for Writing:

- Your literacy narrative will be peer reviewed by your classmates, so do not share information you do not want public.
- The persuasiveness of a narrative rests on the details it provides. Try to do more than summarize your experience in your narrative; in addition, capture the concrete details (the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, dialogue, and feelings) that make up this experience.
- Avoid reducing the significance of your literacy narrative to a simple commonplace, such as “this experience taught me how important reading is” or “without literacy, I would not be the person I am today.” Remember that, according to Brandt, the story of how we acquire literacy is complex. Sponsors aren’t necessarily benevolent; they both “support” and “withhold” literacy, and they do so for particular reasons--some of which have nothing to do with helping someone read and write. **Your narrative should attempt to capture the complex situation of literacy sponsorship in some way.**

Length & Format: 1500 words, double-spaced, sources cited in MLA

Due Dates (due to the relevant locations):

- Draft 1 (of at least 900 words, not including works cited) due **Sunday, Sept. 13, 11:59 PM**
- Final draft (of at least 1500 words, not including works cited or Dear Reader) due **Sunday, Sept. 27, 11:59 PM**
 - Don't forget your Dear Reader! See next page for details.

** Remember what Brandt says about teachers - please try to complicate your notion of teachers-as-sponsors.*

***Include** with the *final version* of the narrative a "Dear Reader" letter, addressed to the class, that answers the following questions:

- What are the strengths of your literacy narrative? What are its problems?
- What were the challenges you encountered writing the literacy narrative and how did you address them?
- What specific revisions did you make from your first draft? How do you think this enabled you to write a stronger paper?
- If you had two more days to revise the literacy narrative, what additional changes would you make and why?

Support your response to these questions with specific details from your literacy narrative and experience. The Dear Reader does *not* count toward the 1500-word minimum.

Assignment Specifications: Below are the criteria I will use to assess each student's essay.

An effective essay

- Focuses on one particular moment or event in your literacy history that is described in vivid detail
- Analyzes the narrative it tells, explaining the significance or meaning of the event **and** how it applies to Brandt's theory of literacy sponsorship
- Demonstrates an accurate understanding of Brandt's theory of literacy sponsorship
- Is appropriately and effectively organized both among and between paragraphs
- Documents sources using MLA in-text citations and a Works Cited

- Avoids excessive basic writing errors and stylistic problems that prevent readers from comprehending the narrative
- Includes a Dear Reader letter that answers the four questions listed above, using evidence from the author's writing and/or experience

The Great deBACHle

(see what I did here?)

(prelude and fugue in several voices that keep running through my head)

Composed by XXXXXXXXXXXX

For Professor XXXXXX
English 110

On the occasion of being commissioned
To compose a Literacy Narrative
27 September 2020

In memoriam the souls of young musicians
lost to the quest for perfect competition scores
at the cost of passionate performances

“FOCUS!”

“No excuses!”

“Stay in time.”

“RELAX!”

“Feel the beat.”

“You’ve got this.” “Colleges look at competitions.”

“Don’t forget to make eye contact with the judges.”

“You’re my student--I decide!”

“Bach first, then Beethoven (1st movement only!),
Debussy (he’s my favorite!), then Ginastera (big finish).”

“No matter what happens it’s gonna be okay (thanks mom and dad).”

“You MUST trust me!”
that!)!”

“Don’t mess up the transitions (like I ever plan

“Think like Beethoven--
to play a wrong note is insignificant, to play without passion is inexcusable”

“I’m prepared. I have prepared.”

“I’ve done everything I could to be ready.”

“Do NOT get tense!”

“Don’t think too much while playing.”

“Let muscle memory guide the way.”

“You’ll get a break after this.”

“30 minutes is nothing in the big scheme of the universe.”

“You must compete.”

“Dynamics!”

“Get through Bach and you’ve got this.”

“You’ve done this program before, you’ll be fine.”

“Don’t forget to breathe.”

“All it takes is one screw up.”

“You’ve practiced these pieces, you have no reason to worry.”

“I’m YOUR teacher and have the final say in your competition repertoire!”

“Never forget, YOU chose to study with ME!”

A fugue of voices congregate in my head; teachers (present and past), mentors, parents, master classes, conductors, competition judges, and composers all competing to play a part in my story. (shh! I've got to get on stage.)

I walked slowly into the chapel. A sacred spot--hushed and muted. The cavernous space echoed with eerie silence like the universe was holding its breath waiting for me to arrive. Dust motes danced and guided me to the stage. Dressed in standard audition attire--black shirt, black pants, black socks, black shoes, black belt, red brocade bow tie--I had no reason to think that I'd dressed for my own funeral.

The piano was housed in the chapel on campus like a reliquary placed on the pulpit. It stored all the potential for success or martyrdom--a shrine to Western repertory practices and the altar of competition. It stood sentry at the gate that led to the pinnacle of high school piano performance. So many musicians have entered this space in anticipation of making it come alive with their performance. The glistening wood and faint lemon smell of wood polish tickled my nose and helped mask the smell of stale candles and the lingering taste of despair and lost chances.

I climbed onto the stage and greeted the judges with a bow of respect just as my teacher had commanded me to execute. They sat like gargoyles--silent and still. Stone sentinels devoted to protecting the perceived sanctity of Western civilization's music. I lowered myself onto the piano bench and sat up straight. The bench was cold, hard, and uncomfortable. I swear the powers that be conspire to find the most uncomfortable benches for competitions. It is an unwritten rule that all judges seem to know. I shifted and adjusted several times before I greeted the piano with a quick caress of the keys.

The black matte beast was heavy to the touch. A neat fact: Each piano has a unique personality. A distinct character that either endears it to the performer or makes the pianist despair. As I started to warm up my fingers and get a feel for this piano's voice, touch, and quirks, I silently mourned. The black keys were disproportionate to the white keys. A fraction smaller, thinner than typical--why was this piano (this mutant/alien instrument) allowed to exist? No concert pianist would ever willingly share space with this monstrosity. Even my teacher would despise it. I tried to make friends with the beast as I ran my fingers up and down the register.

After I introduced myself to the piano, I looked up from the keys and nodded across the silence to let the judges know that I was prepared to start my program. They nodded back stoically to indicate that they were ready and waiting for me to begin. I shifted on the bench and focused on audiating the exact sound I wanted to produce. I slowly raised my hands into position poised above the keys, squared my shoulders to the keyboard, channeled my inner Bach, and began playing the "Prelude and Fugue in C# Major," BWV 848. It is one of the most technically challenging pieces I'd ever played. A grueling piece, chosen by my teacher to start the program because it would impress the judges.

I executed the prelude with sweet success. I exhaled with a sense of relief and felt a scintilla of pressure lifting off my shoulders. I had survived the prelude and managed to make Bach's notes sing with grace and dignity. I paused, waiting to launch the fugue until the last note of the prelude stopped sounding in the voluminous space. "All you need to do is get through the fugue and you'll be home free." (no pressure at all,

right?) My fingers glided across the keyboard and I settled into the rhythmically complex counterpoint of the fugue.

As more voices entered Bach's fugue and gathered momentum, a phantom-like thumping sounded offstage. It was as if the disembodied and disenchanted ghosts of students lost in piano performance purgatory were warning me of my pending disaster. The noise contrasted and confused the rhythms of the fugue. The thumping stood in stark and blatant contrast to the room's otherwise calm, cavernous quiet. The disruptive thumping competed with the rhythms of Bach and jarred awake the sleeping cacophony of voices clamoring for space in my head. The gathering of voices in my mind quickly outnumbered those struggling to sing in the fugue I was playing.

"Where the hell is that noise coming from???"

"FOCUS!"

"Only a little more!!!!"

"Whatever you do, don't stop!!!"

"Will that noise ever cease?!?"

Then, in an instant, the unthinkable happened. The horror of a wrong note sounded into time and space and I was powerless to recall it or correct the domino effect that ensued. I hesitated. The music stopped. Silence. The only thing audible was the judges' pencils scratching into the paper like stone talons tearing the pages apart as I sat not playing. I could hear the blood beating in my ears and coursing

through my veins. Sweat was running down my spine. My cold fingers were still and motionless.

The world tilted and time stood still. Even the dust motes froze midair, refusing to dance through my despair. The walls leaned in; my lungs felt like they were collapsing. All the conversations in my head blended into an amalgamation of chaos.

In that moment of chaotic discord, I realized that nothing I played from that point on mattered. I wasn't going to win the competition. My teacher was going to kill me. I had stopped during a performance and there was nothing I could do to redeem myself in her eyes. She wouldn't care about the spectral thumping that was emanating from somewhere offstage, nor would she be empathetic about my failed battle with the black keys. Thirty minutes of programmed music and I had lost my way within the first five!

I will confess that after the initial horror of coming to a full stop and having to restart, the pressure of playing perfectly was eviscerated. The quick death of a potentially perfect program allowed me a certain macabre freedom to execute the rest of the performance without fear or restraint. Knowing I had nothing to lose, I played from the heart and felt a joy in the performance that had been lost in the forced preparation to compete.

Over the years, I've struggled to understand how our student/teacher relationship deteriorated so quickly. I remember the excitement of walking through the stained glass door of her studio for the first time. I felt at home amidst her Buddhas, singing bowls, and worn, well-loved copies of Bach and Debussy. Her Shepard Fairey print demanded that I "Make Art Not War" as I spent an hour every Tuesday devoted to finding the joy in

creating a moment of perfect sound. It was an idyllic interlude and the highlight of my week. She quickly became the beacon that guided me through the intricacies of classical repertoire--my lodestone.

As I read Deborah Brandt's "Sponsors of Literacy," it became clear to me that the relationship between a sponsor and the sponsored can be both intricate and complicated. Brandt explains that while those being sponsored gain access to literacy (in my case music literacy) the sponsors "stand to gain benefits from their (sponsored's) success whether by direct repayment or, indirectly, by credit of association" (167). I realized that when I competed my teacher's name was linked to my performance and in that way, my performance became a reflection of my teacher and her reputation was either enhanced or diminished because of my standing.

The irony of this crushed me. I remembered begging my parents to let me join her studio not solely because of the way she spoke about Debussy painting with sound, but because she abhorred competitions. I chose her specifically because she hated how competitions created a false sense of stress in the world of music, a false narrative of who was the "best," when music should inherently be consumed by a live audience--not judges.

When I joined her studio, she explained that she chose to teach young artists because her own experience at conservatory had been so painful. The professor she had studied under had screamed and shouted, ranted and raved, and ultimately my teacher had dropped out to study closer to home. She implored me to choose my future

professors with care and emphatically warned me that my choice could make or break me.

So, how did I end up on stage in a chapel dressed for my own funeral? The gateway to competition hell was entered through local scholarship auditions. I wanted to help my parents pay for piano lessons. (They add up!) I won the scholarships but ultimately lost my mentor. As I won more scholarships, people started associating my wins with her studio. She urged me to start entering actual competitions because the act of competing would be looked at favorably by colleges and conservatories. Competing intrinsically changed how our student/teacher dynamic worked or perhaps it amplified/intensified the ways in which the relationship was already broken.

The bond between student and teacher lost much of its initial magic as it was no longer about the passion of the performance, but more about what the judges would say in their comments and how that would reflect back on my teacher. Her name became bound to mine in a way that created an uncomfortable anxiety when I missed a note. It was wonderful to bask in her praise but frightening to hover in the shadow of her displeasure when a competition, a performance, or even a lesson went sour. She had become the very teacher she had vehemently advocated against--the epitome of everything she had warned me to avoid.

The journey home from the competition was not the celebration of a perfect performance that I had hoped it would be, nor was it a dirge or lament dedicated to my failure. As we drove home, dad handed me the envelope with the judges' notes inside. He joked that if I didn't want to read them he could make the envelope "self-destruct."

The judges had praised me for my recovery and each was empathetic and suggested ways to avoid another “deBACHle” in the future. Three hours from home, I called my mom and begged her to call my teacher so I wouldn’t have to listen to the ranting and recriminations. The relationship had quietly devolved--becoming a toxic spiral into despondency and dysfunction. It still frightens me that I couldn't/didn't recognize the damage being inflicted as it was happening.

Shortly after that cursed competition, I left the studio where I had fallen in love with the craft and artistry of piano performance. It was soul-shattering. I’ve always known that music was my first language. I hummed Bach and Beethoven before I spoke sentences. The horror of “losing my voice” during a competition was both terrifying and heartbreaking. Knowing that my mentor was complicit amplified and complicated the angst I was feeling. It made me question so much about my identity, where I was going, and the path I had chosen. What if I wasn’t good enough to be a musician? I am still recovering from my “deBACHle.” In the aftermath, I have come to realize that I am not defined by one performance in my music career. I have regained my passion for performing, but I am still trying to make peace with my imperfections. Most days I accept and embrace the idea that I am still a work in progress.

Work Cited

Brandt, Deborah. "Sponsors of Literacy." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 49, no. 2, 1998, pp. 165–85. *JSTOR*, doi:10.2307/358929.

Dear Reader,

I'll be perfectly honest with you, I am shocked at how many hours it took me to write this narrative. I will also share that I'm more excited about the descriptive details than I probably should be. I wasn't sure when I started writing this if I could create a written atmosphere for my narrative to exist/thrive. I think the attention to detail makes the narrative read like a story and I'm happy with that. I'm especially attached to the "dancing dustmotes" and the description of me getting to know the piano. I've never written anything like this before and it was a much different process than writing a research paper! I'd never really thought about having to invest myself emotionally in the creation of anything I wrote with words. I feel invested in this narrative in a way that I did not expect.

I have struggled to make this narrative sound the way I want it to. I think the problems with my paper (at this point) are mostly technical. There are still sections where the cadence feels "off" when I read it out loud. I worry that the transitions could still use tweaking. I think I've made the ending less abrupt, but I still feel like I didn't do justice to the absolute panic this moment of my life can still evoke. I worry that I haven't expressed the idea of sponsorship as a complex relationship as succinctly as I might have.

It was quite emotional to write about the “deBACHle.” However, it became cathartic and made me rethink the experience now that I’m a few years away from actually living through it. I initially couldn’t write a single sentence about why it was such a dark period of my piano studies. I almost decided to write about another literacy moment and actually started composing a whole other narrative, but the “deBACHle” kept showing up in my notes. So, I started making a master list of every detail I could remember about my time studying with my teacher and how it made me feel. I had a really hard time committing my comments and thoughts to paper--it was almost like my teacher was watching over my shoulder waiting until I thought it was safe and then she’d jump into the narrative to shout over my story and point out how I was wrong.

Mostly, I wrote a lot and then printed it all out and then physically cut apart paragraphs and even sentences and rearranged them on the floor (like Frankenstein’s monster) and taped them together. Then, I did that again. And again. I know there must be a more efficient way, but I couldn’t see how the paragraphs should be organized when they were all stuck together on the computer screen. Also, the act of cutting it apart felt productive in a way that copying and pasting on the computer did not. I just knew I didn’t want my paper to read like a research paper! So, with every edit/addition, I added more sensory details. I also thought a great deal about “writerly choices” and what I enjoy reading.

The draft I turned in for the “first draft” was more like my fifth. I feel guilty about all the trees I sacrificed at the altar of higher education. I did recycle and reuse the various drafts for scrap paper, but trees were hurt in my quest to compose this

narrative. After the peer review (thanks Maggie and Meg!), I went back to the beginning and added small references/details about my teacher/sponsor to help you, the reader, understand a little more about the background leading up to the “deBACHle.” In my first draft, I didn’t mention my teacher until after I had stopped playing during my performance. In my revisions, I added comments about my teacher to let you, the reader, know that she was “commanding me” to bow, that she would “despise” the competition piano, and that she had chosen my repertoire. I hope it worked and the idea of sponsorship is more clear throughout the narrative.

For the final draft, I added more details about my relationship with my teacher and how the relationship was negatively impacted by the act of competing--hopefully, the ending feels less rushed. This also allowed me to create a sense of closure which didn’t happen in my “first” draft. I think these decisions helped create a stronger sense of my relationship with my teacher and how it all derailed. My intent was to make the story feel more resolved. I wanted the reader to know that I’m in a much better place now!

If I had two more days to edit my narrative, I’d probably still be wasting time looking for an awesome “Old English” font for the title page! I was trying to make it look like a music score and none of the Google Doc fonts achieved the look I wanted. I tried importing some and then I had to spend a few hours undoing the mess I created--time I wanted/needed to be at the piano practicing Debussy! I might even attempt to change the page numbering to make it look more like a score. I would probably obsess over my

grammar some more! I thought I had a functional understanding of grammar until I read the BWEs worksheet. Now, I question all my grammar instincts.

Every time I've read this narrative out loud, I've heard another hitch in the cadence that needs to be fixed or a word that feels out of place. I have no idea how professional writers ever finish a book! Reading this narrative out loud made me slow down and see/hear the words and what I was trying to say. I am still worried that the ending isn't perfect. The ending was the hardest to write and I'm not sure, even if I spent a few more weeks on it, that it would ever feel like it is finished. I might try to make the transition into using Brandt's article as a lens a little less abrupt. I might also go back and add another Brandt quote to help the reader better understand the complex nature of my relationship with my sponsor. I wish I had thought of that earlier in the writing process!

I certainly don't enjoy writing any more than I did before I began this narrative. However, I feel like I have a much better roadmap for the journey than I did before I started and that is comforting. It's sort of like having your hurricane supplies all ready to evacuate. I don't want to have to use them, but it is comforting to know they're there in case I need them.

Thanks,

XXXXXXXXXX