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In his sweeping history of adult learning in the United States, Joseph Kett (1994) describes the intellectual atmosphere available to young apprentices who worked in the small,

decentralized print shops of antebellum America. Because printers also were the solicitors and

editors of what they published, their workshops served as lively incubators for literacy and

political discourse. By the mid-nineteenth century, however, this learning space was disrupted

when the invention of the steam press reorganized the economy of the print industry. Steam

presses were so expensive that they required capital outlays beyond the means of many printers.

As a result, print jobs were outsourced, the processes of editing and printing were split, and, in

tight competition, print apprentices became low-paid mechanics with no more access to the

multi-skilled environment of the craftshop (Kett, 1994). While this shift in working conditions

may be evidence of the deskilling of workers induced by the Industrial Revolution (Nicholas &

Nicholas, 1992), it also offers a site for reflecting upon the dynamic sources of literacy and

literacy learning. The reading and writing skills of print apprentices in this period were an

achievement not simply of teachers and learners nor of the discourse practices of the printer

community. Rather, these skills existed fragilely, contingently within an economic moment. The

pre-steam press economy enabled some of the most basic aspects of the apprentices' literacy,

especially their access to material production and the public meaning or worth of their skills.

Paradoxically, even as the steam-powered penny press made print more accessible (by making

publishing more profitable), it brought an end to a particular form of literacy sponsorship and a

drop in literate potential.

The apprentices' experience invites rumination upon literacy learning and teaching today.

Literacy looms as one of the great engines of profit and competitive advantage in the twentieth

century: a lubricant for consumer desire; a means for integrating corporate markets; a foundation

for the deployment of weapons and other technology; a raw material in the mass production of

information. As ordinary citizens have been compelled into these economies, their reading and

writing skills have grown sharply more central to the everyday trade of information and goods as well as to the pursuit of education, employment, civil rights, and status. At the same time,

people's literate skills have grown vulnerable to unprecedented turbulence in their economic

value, as conditions, forms, and standards of literacy achievement seem to shift with almost

every new generation of learners. How are we to understand the vicissitudes of individual

literacy development in relationship to the large-scale economic forces that set the routes and

determine the wordly worth of that literacy?

The field of writing studies has had much to say about individual literacy development.

Especially in the last quarter of the twentieth century, we have theorized, researched, critiqued,

debated, and sometimes even managed to enhance the literate potentials of ordinary citizens as

they have tried to cope with life as they find it. Less easily and certainly less steadily have we

been able to relate what we see, study, and do to these larger contexts of profit making and

competition. This even as we recognize that the most pressing issues we deal with -- tightening

associations between literate skill and social viability, the breakneck pace of change in

communications technology, persistent inequities in access and reward -- all relate to structural

conditions in literacy's bigger picture. When economic forces are addressed in our work, they

appear primarily as generalities: contexts, determinants, motivators, barriers, touchstones. But

rarely are they systematically related to the local conditions and embodied moments of literacy

learning that occupy so many of us on a daily basis.

This essay does not presume to overcome the analytical failure completely. But it does offer a conceptual approach that begins to connect literacy as an individual development to literacy as an economic development, at least as the two have played out over the last ninety years or so. The approach is through what I call sponsors of literacy. Sponsors, as I have come to think of them, are any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, or model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold literacy -- and gain advantage by it in some way. Just as the ages of radio and television accustom us to having programs brought to us by various commercial sponsors, it is useful to think about who or what underwrites occasions of

literacy learning and use. Although the interests of the sponsor and the sponsored do not have to

converge (and, in fact, may conflict) sponsors nevertheless set the terms for access to literacy

and wield powerful incentives for compliance and loyalty. Sponsors are a tangible reminder that literacy learning throughout history has always required permission, sanction, assistance,

coercion, or, at minimum, contact with existing trade routes. Sponsors are delivery systems for

the economies of literacy, the means by which these forces present themselves to -- and through -

- individual learners. They also represent the causes into which people's literacy usually gets

recruited.

For the last five years I have been tracing sponsors of literacy across the twentieth century as they appear in the accounts of ordinary Americans recalling how they learned to write and read. The investigation is grounded in more than 100 in-depth interviews that I collected from a diverse group of people born roughly between 1900 and 1980. In the interviews, people explored in great detail their memories of learning to read and write across their lifetimes, focusing especially on the people, institutions, materials, and motivations involved in the process. The more I worked with these accounts, the more I came to realize that they were filled with references to sponsors, both explicit and latent, who appeared in formative roles at the scenes of literacy learning. Patterns of sponsorship became an illuminating site through which to track the different cultural attitudes people developed toward writing vs. reading ("remembering") as well as the ideological congestion faced by late-century literacy learners as their sponsors proliferated and diversified ("accumulating"). In this essay I set out a case for why the concept of sponsorship is so richly suggestive for exploring economies of literacy and their effects. Then, through use of extended case examples, I demonstrate the practical application of this approach for interpreting current conditions of literacy teaching and learning, including persistent stratification of opportunity and escalating standards for literacy achievement. A final section addresses implications for the teaching of writing.

**Sponsorship**

Intuitively, sponsors seemed a fitting term for the figures who turned up most typically in

people's memories of literacy learning: older relatives, teachers, priests, supervisors, military

officers, editors, influential authors. Sponsors, as we ordinarily think of them, are powerful

figures who bankroll events or smooth the way for initiates. Usually richer, more knowledgeable, and more entrenched than the sponsored, sponsors nevertheless enter a reciprocal relationship

with those they underwrite. They lend their resources or credibility to the sponsored but also

stand to gain benefits from their success, whether by direct repayment or, indirectly, by credit of

association. Sponsors also proved an appealing term in my analysis because of all the

commercial references that appeared in these twentieth-century accounts -- the magazines,

peddled encyclopedias, essay contests, radio and television programs, toys, fan clubs, writing

tools, and so on, from which so much experience with literacy was derived. As the twentieth

century turned the abilities to read and write into widely exploitable resources, commercial

sponsorship abounded.

In whatever form, sponsors deliver the ideological freight that must be borne for access to

what they have. Of course, the sponsored can be oblivious to or innovative with this ideological

burden. Like Little Leaguers who wear the logo of a local insurance agency on their uniforms,

not out of a concern for enhancing the agency's image but as a means for getting to play ball,

people throughout history have acquired literacy pragmatically under the banner of others'

causes. In the days before free, public schooling in England, Protestant Sunday Schools warily

offered basic reading instruction to working-class families as part of evangelical duty. To the

horror of many in the church sponsorship, these families insistently, sometimes riotously

demanded of their Sunday Schools more instruction, including in writing and math, because it

provided means for upward mobility.3 Through the sponsorship of Baptist and Methodist

ministries, African Americans in slavery taught each other to understand the Bible in

subversively liberatory ways. Under a conservative regime, they developed forms of critical

literacy that sustained religious, educational, and political movements both before and after

emancipation (Cornelius, 1991). Most of the time, however, literacy takes its shape from the

interests of its sponsors. And, as we will see below, obligations toward one's sponsors run deep,

affecting what, why, and how people write and read.

The concept of sponsors helps to explain, then, a range of human relationships and

ideological pressures that turn up at the scenes of literacy learning -- from benign sharing

between adults and youths, to euphemized coercions in schools and workplaces, to the most

notorious impositions and deprivations by church or state. It also is a concept useful for tracking literacy's materiel: the things that accompany writing and reading and the ways they are

manufactured and distributed. Sponsorship as a sociological term is even more broadly

suggestive for thinking about economies of literacy development. Studies of patronage in Europe

and compradrazgo in the Americas show how patron-client relationships in the past grew up

around the need to manage scarce resources and promote political stability (Bourne, 1986;

Lynch, 1986; Horstman & Kurtz, 1978). Pragmatic, instrumental, ambivalent, patron-client

relationships integrated otherwise antagonistic social classes into relationships of mutual, albeit

unequal dependencies. Loaning land, money, protection, and other favors allowed the politically

powerful to extend their influence and justify their exploitation of clients. Clients traded their

labor and deference for access to opportunities for themselves or their children and for leverage

needed to improve their social standing. Especially under conquest in Latin America,

compradrazgo reintegrated native societies badly fragmented by the diseases and other

disruptions that followed foreign invasions. At the same time, this system was susceptible to its

own stresses, especially when patrons became clients themselves of still more centralized or

distant overlords, with all the shifts in loyalty and perspective that entailed (Horstman & Kurtz,

1978).

In raising this association with formal systems of patronage, I do not wish to overlook the

very different economic, political, and educational systems within which U.S. literacy has

developed. But where we find the sponsoring of literacy, it will be useful to look for its function

within larger political and economic arenas. Literacy, like land, is a valued commodity in this

economy, a key resource in gaining profit and edge. This value helps to explain, of course, the

lengths people will go to to secure literacy for themselves or their children. But it also explains

why the powerful work so persistently to conscript and ration the powers of literacy. The

competition to harness literacy, to manage, measure, teach, and exploit it, has intensified

throughout the century. It is vital to pay attention to this development because it largely sets the

terms for individuals' encounters with literacy. This competition shapes the incentives and

barriers (including uneven distributions of opportunity) that greet literacy learners in any

particular time and place. It is this competition that has made access to the right kinds of literacy

sponsors so crucial for political and economic well being. And it also has spurred the rapid,

complex changes that now make the pursuit of literacy feel so turbulent and precarious for so

many.

In the next three sections, I trace the dynamics of literacy sponsorship through the life

experiences of several individuals, showing how their opportunities for literacy learning emerge

out of the jockeying and skirmishing for economic and political advantage going on among

sponsors of literacy. Along the way, the analysis addresses three key issues: (1) How, despite

ostensible democracy in educational chances, stratification of opportunity continues to organize

access and reward in literacy learning; (2) How sponsors contribute to what is called "the literacy

crisis," that is, the perceived gap between rising standards for achievement and people's ability to

meet them; (3) How encounters with literacy sponsors, especially as they are configured at the

end of the twentieth century, can be sites for the innovative rerouting of resources into projects

of self-development and social change.