

Book review

The Rise of Writing Redefining Mass Literacy

Brandt, D. (2015). *The rise of writing: Redefining mass literacy*. Cambridge University Press. | 216 p - ISBN-9781107462113

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In her book *The rise of writing – redefining mass literacy*, from 2015, Deborah Brandt goes deep into the act and meaning of writing. She explores what it is that people do with writing, their encounters with writing and their relationship with writing. She brings writing to the forefront, leaving the reading part of literacy at the side, and illustrates with a great number of examples how writing has become an increasingly important part of most people's lives. The book is set in the USA and presents a large research study Brandt has carried out over the past decade.

In the introduction Brandt takes the reader through the history of American literacy, she discusses how the focus of literacy has been on reading and how literacy relates to the development of democracy and freedom of speech. Reading, rather than writing, has been attached to high morals and intellectuality, while writing has implied a challenge to the prevailing societal order. She also discusses how the development of both economy and technology has put increasing demands on writing, for example, by the production of legal documents, agreements and for social communicative purposes. From a European, Swedish perspective we recognise the development of literacy she describes. Here too the focus on reading has been strong throughout history, and for a long time it has left writing to the aesthetics of copying with beautiful handwriting. Over the past decades, though, similar changes have occurred to those described by Brandt and we can witness how writing has become an important skill for work as well as for education and pleasure.



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Contents and themes

In the introduction Brandt introduces her study and her research method, which is underpinned by a realist approach, narrative inquiry and grounded theory. Over a period of seven years she has interviewed ninety people in the USA in order to “explore how writing’s differences from reading might be pulling mass literacy in new directions” (p. 7) and to “see [...] whether people might consider writing a site for the same kinds of moral and intellectual growth that is habitually attributed to reading” (p. 7). All the participants have a close relationship with writing, either as part of their profession or as a part of their free-time activities. Sixty participants are adults writing at their workplace and thirty are teenagers who pursue writing as a creative or political act. In the four chapters she presents her analysis of different sub-sections of the material. Rather than focussing on individual stories, she views her informants as witnesses to socio-historical change (p. 8) which brings to life an interesting historical, and current, perspective on the role of writing.

In the first two chapters, Brandt discusses *The status of writing* (Chapter 1) and *Writing for the state* (Chapter 2). Here the focus is on writing for pay and how that impacts on the texts that are written, the writers and their sense of authorship. She exemplifies how workplace values, rules and ethics not only frame the writing at the workplace but also affect employers’ expression through writing outside the workplace. Writers, whether employed in private companies or government, have to adjust to whatever they are hired to write and may even get challenged on text they, for example publish privately on social media. Throughout, Brandt discusses the depth of literacy and democracy and problematizes the role of writing and writers.

In Chapter 3, *Occupation – author: Writing over reading in the literacy development of contemporary youth*, Brandt first underlines the different historic origins and present conditions of mass writing and mass reading. Writing has been, and is, treated as subordinate and auxiliary to reading in American society and schooling. Further, writing and reading have been supported by different sponsors. Church and State have sponsored mass reading while artisanship and commerce supported the development of writing skills. Brandt argues that the balance between reading and writing in today’s American society has shifted so that writing is now more prominent than reading. In order to research the characteristics of a writing-based literacy, Brandt has interviewed 30 young adults aged 15 to 25 who prefer writing to reading and who regularly write outside school. In the analysis of the interviews Brandt focused on “all patterns relating to the sponsorship legacy of mass writing” (p. 95). Here she especially looked for interview accounts concerning “craft, commerce and publishing” (p. 95). In this chapter Brandt defines writing as “the common sense notion of producing and inscribing words”(p. 92) leaving ephemeral, conversational writing, such as texting on a mobile phone, out of the analysis. It is the participants’ creative writing that is in focus.

Offering an abundance of examples from the interviews, Brandt illustrates and analyses the experiences of the young writers (the vivid interview accounts actually inspire readers of her book to write themselves!). Brandt finds that the young writers she

has interviewed have a common perspective on literacy which she calls *writing over reading*. Firstly, there was a strong tendency among the participants to prefer writing to reading. Their accounts give expression to their aspirations to become professional writers but also to their doubts that they will succeed in reaching this goal. Brandt argues that what is serving the literacy development of these young writers is not only text making in a narrow sense but rather “stepping into the public role of the writer, using vocational props, and engaging the apparatus of publication” (p. 114). Secondly, Brandt uses the phrase *writing over reading* in the investigation of how the participants “pursued their orientations to writing” (p. 96) in contexts where they were being constructed as readers. The participants had experienced such situations in varying contexts: in schooling, at home and in their interaction with friends. Thirdly, Brandt studies *writing over reading* as a strategy that the participants used during reading in order to dissociate themselves from the role of the reader. Thus, while reading a text written by somebody else, they would not engage in activities connected to reading, such as comprehension and critique. Instead they would start planning their own writing.

Challenging the prevalent understanding of reading as the experience, which defines literacy, Brandt presents a theory of literacy that takes writing as the starting point. She introduces the possibility that reading may actually not be necessary for writing development. Among the young writers Brandt has interviewed, there are examples of the development of reading through writing. She also states that a writing-based theory of literacy would be consistent with the changing communicative landscape where all citizens need to write on a daily basis. Brandt illuminates the possibilities a writing-based literacy could imply for the self-improvement and literacy development of those who write. She also argues that a deepened understanding of writers’ experiences is needed. Contrasting a writing-based literacy to a reading based, Brandt finds that writing is not only an internalizing experience but also an externalizing experience. In writing, writers let their thoughts out into the open for others to see, and this can lead to unpleasant experiences such as “misattribution, parody, estrangement, charges of libel, self-exposure, the need for a pseudonym” (p. 133). However, in instructional contexts such consequences of writing are seldom discussed.

In chapter 4, *When everybody writes*, Brandt uses the concept *mentalities* which she aligns with Durkheim’s concept *social facts*. Brandt focuses on “what everybody takes to be the case, the conditions that people notice and work with as they notice others working with them too.” (p. 137). Mentalities affect the actions of individuals as well as the practices of institutions. The chapter is based on all ninety interviews in the study and focuses on their experiences of mass writing, especially experiences of writing in contexts where other people, too, are writing. The most recurrent social fact in the interview accounts is that “writing is scenic” (p. 137). When the participants engage in writing, other people are physically present and the presence of others had an impact on the participants’ views on themselves as writers. However, they also

needed knowledge of the writing of other people in order to get their job done. Particularly salient was knowledge about the writing of others in the relationships between subordinates and their superiors. In this chapter there is also a section which investigates stereotypes connected to writing. Brandt finds that the most salient stereotypes among the participants of her study are those which centre on generational characteristics. Among the participants, the younger generation is seen as less literate than the older.

Finally Brandt describes the writing careers of two participants for whom the changing mentalities of mass writing had different impacts. One was an IT entrepreneur whose “prescience, innovations and job security were constantly overtaken” (p. 149) as people’s habits of writing and interacting changed and web-based writing evolved into mass practices. The other participant was an elder care manager who had experiences from working in a field where these new writing practices had strengthened and consolidated the writing environment she worked within.

Our thoughts

In her book Brandt underlines the differences, contrasts and rivalry between reading and writing. In this respect her perspective differs from the prevailing perspective in the social practice paradigm where attention is rather paid to the interconnections, overlap and interdependence between reading and writing in people’s lives. However, she admits that reading and writing are intertwined in the exercise of literacy. And as the reader gets acquainted with her arguments it becomes evident that her focus on differences and contrasts is a necessary step for her to take in bringing light upon writing, or, in her own words, to “bring writing out of the shadow of reading” (p. 92). In this endeavour her focus on differences and rivalry between reading and writing instead of on interconnections is understandable and necessary.

Brandt’s book is written from an American context. The study consequently takes American cultural history and American society as its points of reference. In her work she underlines the historicity of literacy and consequently situating it in the place and time where the research takes place is necessary. However, the writers of this review are situated in a European and Swedish context and for us it is also interesting to consider in which respects there are differences and similarities in how mass literacy, according to Brandt’s research, has developed and how it works today in our context. A comparison with the Swedish context would bring out many similarities but also some differences. Using *The Rise of Writing* as a starting point, a valuable next step would be to take an international perspective on mass literacy, making comparisons between the development and present situation for mass writing and mass reading in different parts of the world.

The chapters in Brandt’s book represent different interesting perspectives on writing and writers and it gives rise to many questions. What is writing? Who is a writer? To what extent is the writer free to start out from their own interests and needs in the writing process, and to what extent is s/he controlled by dominant societal institutions,

economic interests, hierarchies and legislation? Who will read when everyone is writing? How will those who have no or little access to written literacy be influenced by living in a society influenced by deep writing? What happens to writing now that technology has advanced to afford oracy through sound as well as films, and private and governmental organisations start 'sponsoring' oracy as well as (or instead of) literacy? For sure, *The Rise of Writing*, inspires to continued research in the field of writing.