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# *Historical and Institutional Literacy Sponsors: A Love Story*

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*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. (167)*

–Deborah Brandt

In the realm of education on any particular literacy, history does not act solely as a sponsor, but rather as a foundation for instruction by institutional sponsors on contemporary literacy practices. Professor Deborah Brandt defines literacy sponsors as “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” (167). In the context in which they are used both in my life and in my paper, history and institutions fall under that definition of literacy sponsorship. Furthermore, institutional sponsors of literacy can be divided into either the formal or informal sub-classification. Moreover, both of these institutional divisions play a cohesive role with history as sponsors in the teaching of any given literacy. Specifically, theatre history, functioning alongside both my high school’s drama department as a formal institutional sponsor and my mother-son relationship as an informal institutional sponsor, facilitated the creation of a personal literacy history that unquestionably shaped my theatre literacy. Through analyzing my personal literacy practice of bringing a character out of a script and onto the stage, I argue that history influences literacy practices both directly and indirectly. History directly impacts literacy practices when the performer of that literacy draws directly from historical precedent. It also indirectly influences literacy practices utilizing the mediums of formal and informal literacy sponsors. Therefore, through exploring any particular literacy’s history we can better understand the origins of why and how that specific literacy is used and taught today.

## **History as a Direct Literacy Sponsor**

When examined as a sponsor for acting literacy—and, specifically, my practice of bringing a character from text to life—theatrical history provides great insights into how I learned and exercise characterization. Theatre has existed, in one form or another, since the time of ancient Egypt (about 4000 B.C.) and has developed into hundreds of different forms and practices. Each development and change of dramatic era has lent itself to the next, creating an “evolution” of theatre, both in its presentation and its training. Just as theatre in general has changed and progressed from era to era, the actor’s practice of bringing a character off of the page and onto the stage has shifted as well, undoubtedly altering how I personate today.

The classical period was the age in which actors first became important in theatre. Likewise, it is also the first place that I can directly link some of my literacy practice to history. No matter

which character I interpret or play, I always project my voice so that I am sure to be audible to even the most distant audience member. Ancient Greece was the first place shows were performed for the mass public and actors had to project accordingly: “in the vast open-air theatre at Athens it required a man with an exceptionally clear and powerful voice to make himself audible to the vast multitude of spectators” (Haigh 203). I was never taught this institutionally; rather I drew from this example directly.

Along the same historical sponsorship lines, but even more impactful on my personation literacy practice, are the works of William Shakespeare during the Elizabethan era. I truly began to experiment with and learn new and unique character choices when I began to act in Shakespeare’s plays. What makes Shakespeare’s works particularly supportive of literacy practice is how open his characters are to interpretation. Rather than create a cookie-cutter villain or hero, Shakespeare leaves the door wide open for actors to put their own spin on whichever characters they play. In “What’s the Matter With Shakespeare?: Physics, Identity, Playing,” Northwestern University’s William N. West describes this idea of allowing the play and, consequently, its characters to be interpreted to best fit the zeitgeist in which they are performed:

The plays of Shakespeare, his contemporaries, and their predecessors, both drew on and contributed to . . . producing experiments in what we could call a ‘physics of performance.’ The idea that one body might assume multiple identities was of particular interest to players, which of course their occupation required of them daily. Shakespeare’s plays show no clear allegiance to any particular physical theory of the world, instead displaying a readiness to make use of whatever world picture offered the most dramatic force in any situation. (103)

On the stage, versatility is essential for the literacy practice of bringing a character to life. Having to interpret these four hundred-year-old characters into beings that would impact the modern audience undoubtedly spurred growth in the range of my personation abilities.

To summarize, history acts as a direct literacy sponsor by offering both models and opportunities for creatively developing any given literacy. This is shown through the way I project my voice, regardless of which character I am embodying, and its link back to Greece, as well as the large amount of personalization required in bringing a Shakespearean character to life. Furthermore, we can see the connection between history and the reason particular literacy practices exist as they do today.

## **History as an Indirect Literacy Sponsor through Formal Institutions**

My high school (MCDS), at its most basic function, is an institution for learning; however, when explored as a facilitator of my theatrical extracurricular activities, it becomes a formal institutional sponsor of the stage. An institutional sponsor, whether formal or informal, determines the level of access to a literacy or literacy event and affords incentives for usage and proliferation in that literacy (Brandt 167). MCDS undoubtedly held all of the power in determining not only whether I did or did not have the option to act, but also controlled how competent and knowledgeable my individual directors were. It just so happens that most of the understanding that I now have in the literacy practice of character creation should be attributed to my high school directors, who were, for all intents and purposes, stewards of my formal institutional sponsor.

By extension, it can be said that most, if not all, of the information and technique known by my directors is linked back to the roots of its creation in history. Admittedly, real personation systems taught by directors today do not extend very far back in history, because characterization methods used on stage today were created in the modern era. Nevertheless, both major methods that are still taught, the Stanislavski System and the Meisner Method, were created and proliferated in the

19th and 20th centuries. This is still sufficiently dated enough to be considered history.

The Stanislavski System created by Constantin Stanislavski in the late 1800s is a twofold organism. Initially, it teaches its user to intelligently discern who a character is—what that person likes or does not like, when she was born, her favorite color, and so on—in order to use that information in becoming that character. However, it then teaches the emotional memory technique, which instead charges the actor to use personal emotion memory as a substitute for the character's. Benedetti writes, "Emotional Memory requires that an actor recreate an event from the distant past in order to regenerate the 'feelings' experienced at that time. These feelings thus regenerated are then used in the current acting situation in order to fill out the role with 'human depth and personal involvement'" (66). I had one director, who happened to be my first director, who chose to instruct using the Stanislavski system. I immediately knew, however, that it was not for me. Nevertheless, multiple other members of my cast did decide to use this technique and, accordingly, my director used her knowledge created by history to proliferate this literacy practice.

Ultimately, it is when both a personal history and an informal institution are combined that the true origins of one's literacy interests and practices are revealed and understood.

The structure of personation I chose to use was the Meisner method. In the early 1900s, as an extension to Stanislavski, Sanford Meisner theorized that it would be better for an actor to become the character rather than simply pretend to share his emotions. Meisner charges the actor to be in the moment, rather than plan for it. This makes the actor *be* the person they are portraying. If I'm playing Romeo, for instance, I should actually fall in love with my Juliet in order to portray that feeling as opposed to, drawing on some past love interest of my own. In an interview, University of Central Florida theater professor Sybil St. Claire said, "Meisner's work did not replace Stanislavski's; it is a different path to the same destination. Stanislavski employs the intellect to be here now, whereas Meisner employs intuition."

When I learned to use this method in high school, I was able to do so because history taught Sanford Meisner a system that he then improved upon and imparted to my directors. My directors, being stewards of the formal institutional sponsor of my high school, were able to further my literacy practice by teaching me Meisner's method. The reason they had the ability to do so was because of history teaching them that method. Therefore, history indirectly influenced my literacy practice through the medium of a formal institutional sponsor. Furthermore, it gives us a greater understanding of the origins of information and strategies taught by institutional sponsors.

## History as an Indirect Literacy Sponsor through Informal Institutions

*A person's practices can also be located in their own history of literacy. In order to understand this we need to take a life history approach, observing the history within a person's life. (12)*

–David Barton and Mary Hamilton

While it is most commonly seen as the public happening of events in the past, it is important to remember that history is multifaceted and can also be personal as much as it may be communal. Along those same lines, when we see the word "institution," we tend to think about physical manifestations of an organization, like a school or government. However, these are formal institutions. Informal institutions, like a mother-son relationship, can be just as important, particularly in regards to literacy sponsorship. Ultimately, it is when both a personal history and an informal institution are combined that the true origins of one's literacy interests and practices are revealed and understood.

My mother as an informal institutional sponsor truly molded my learning of theatre literacy and specifically the portrayal of a character. Mom was a dancer growing up in Manhattan, so she was no stranger to Broadway or the performing arts. Accordingly, she exposed me to theatre at a very young age by taking me to shows all throughout my childhood. I immediately fell in love with acting and started to act on and off the stage at a very young age. I had and still do have a very strong mother-son relationship to this day, and that absolutely contributes to my love of theatre. This connects to a point made by Brandt, who writes, “Most of the time, literacy takes its shape from the interests of its sponsors” (168). If it wasn’t for my mother’s theatre push when I was younger, I definitely would not be acting today. It also seems that my mother was an effective proliferator of my theatre literacy by not abusing her powers as my sponsor. She never censored me or regulated which plays I could or could not participate in. Our relationship of being so close and like-minded certainly was a major informal institutional sponsor in the molding of my theatre literacy and its practice.

All of the foundations for my theatre literacy created by the informal institutional sponsor of my mother-son relationship lie within my personal literacy history. Looking back, had I not had the same mother or if we had not gotten along as well as we do, it is probable that I would have no interest in theatre and consequently no literate practice of personation. It is the positive image of my personal literacy history coupled with the informal institutional sponsor of my mother-son relationship that began and supports still my theatre literacy and its associated practices. Hence, personal history indirectly influences literacy and its practices through the vehicle of an informal institutional sponsor. Moreover, it has the capacity to reveal the origins of interest or ability in any given literacy.

## Epilogue

Brandt’s arguments that “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” and that “[s]ponsors are delivery systems for the economies of literacy” prove to highlight the connections between historical sponsors and institutional sponsors (167). Yes, historical sponsors of any given literacy provide assistance and contact with existing and previous “trade routes” for the according literacy practice; however, it is once they combine with the delivery system of an institutional sponsor that they obtain the most powerful “means by which these forces present themselves to and through individual learners” (167). It is the combination of historical and institutional sponsors that creates a powerful sponsorship synergy and strengthens their corresponding literacy practice greater than either one could alone.

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