

Suspected of Having a Book: American Slavery as a Literacy Sponsor

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Abstract

Applying concepts from Deborah Brandt's "Sponsors of Literacy" to Frederick Douglass' "Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass" explains how American slavery functioned as an institutional literacy sponsor, and how Douglass achieved literacy against the opposing forces of his sponsor. During the antebellum period, the American slavery institution, fueled by pro-slavery Anglo Saxons, maintained a social structure that guaranteed political, economic, social, and legal advantages for whites over African Americans. Afraid that literacy acquisition for African Americans might lead to their self-empowerment and eventual freedom, pro-slavery whites dedicated themselves to anti-literacy legislation and other measures aimed at keeping African Americans illiterate. Despite these strenuous efforts, Frederick Douglass acquired literacy by repurposing his sponsor's resources toward literacy projects in his 'neighborhood' classroom. Douglass' description of his literacy journey runs remarkably parallel to Brandt's discussion about ways in which the 'sponsored' can overcome self-interested 'sponsors,' despite obstructions to literacy access routes, and stratified opportunity along race and ethnicity lines. Understanding how literacy sponsorship operated during the 19th century sheds some light on the ongoing literacy crisis today.

Keywords

literacy sponsor, American Slavery, Frederick Douglass

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Applying concepts from Deborah Brandt's "Sponsors of Literacy" to Frederick Douglass' "Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass" explains how American slavery functioned as an institutional literacy sponsor, and how Douglass achieved literacy against the opposing forces of his sponsor. During the antebellum period, the American slavery institution, fueled by pro-slavery Anglo Saxons, maintained a social structure that guaranteed political, economic, social, and legal advantages for whites over African Americans. Afraid that literacy acquisition for African Americans might lead to their self-empowerment and eventual freedom, pro-slavery whites dedicated themselves to anti-literacy legislation and other measures aimed at keeping African Americans illiterate. Despite these strenuous efforts, Frederick Douglass acquired literacy by repurposing his sponsor's resources toward literacy projects in his 'neighborhood' classroom. Douglass' description of his literacy journey runs remarkably parallel to Brandt's discussion about ways in which the 'sponsored' can overcome self-interested 'sponsors,' despite obstructions to literacy access routes, and stratified opportunity along race and ethnicity lines. Understanding how literacy sponsorship operated during the 19th century sheds some light on the ongoing literacy crisis today.

In her essay "Sponsors of Literacy," Deborah Brandt defines a literacy sponsor as "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" (46). This breakthrough in understanding how people acquire, or do not acquire, literacy provides valuable insight into understanding the institution of American slavery as a literacy sponsor. This institution, consisting of pro-slavery Anglo Saxons, purposefully withheld literacy opportunities from slaves in order to maintain an unequal social structure; many Anglo-Saxons fought and died in an attempt to protect this structure, as it guaranteed political, economic, social, and legal advantages over African Americans. Despite this attempt to preserve the status quo, some slaves persevered against great odds to achieve literacy. This sort of literacy journey is observed in the story presented in "Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass." Applying Brandt's concepts of literacy sponsorship to Douglass' slave narrative explains how slavery functioned as an institutional literacy sponsor, and how Douglass achieved literacy against the opposing forces of his sponsor.

Critical to this discussion is establishing the dynamic nature of literacy sponsors. The word 'sponsor' carries somewhat of a positive connotation. Generally, the term 'sponsor' suggests a mutually beneficial relationship between two individuals or organizations that enables both parties to achieve goals. For example, Brandt

relates mutually beneficial sponsorship to little league athletes who wear the logo of local businesses. The children have the financial support necessary to play and the company is able to promote their image however, this certainly does not mean that all *literacy* sponsors function to advance the interests of the sponsored (Brandt 47). Brandt is clear about this point when she asserts, “while opening some doors, literacy sponsors may close others. Literacy sponsors are not always (or even, perhaps, usually) altruistic—they have self-interested reasons for sponsoring literacy, and very often only some kinds of literacy will support their goals” (Brandt 43). In her book, *When I Can Read My Title Clear*, Janet Duitsman Cornelius spotlights the goals of slavery as a sponsor. She explains how some slave-owners gave basic literacy lessons to their slaves in order to maximize their utility (i.e., slave-owners wanted slaves to handle incoming and outgoing mail). Cornelius also explains how many slave-owners were “reluctant to allow slaves the measure of equality implied by literacy and who feared any skill which could give slaves more autonomy” (5). Clearly, the institution of slavery is an extreme example of what Brandt would call a ‘self-interested’ literacy sponsor.

Before discussing how Frederick Douglass was denied literacy, it is necessary to understand the motivation for the sponsor in question to withhold literacy. An important aspect of this story is the socioeconomic position of whites over slaves, namely in the American South. Brandt identifies this socioeconomic position as a characteristic of sponsors when she claims that sponsors tend to be “richer, more knowledgeable, and more entrenched than the sponsored” (Brandt

47). Of course, those in positions of power fear losing their power. To pro-slavery whites, an educated slave threatened the white advantage. Whites feared that literate slaves would “petition colonial courts for their liberty,” and “use their writing skills to protest the entire slavery institution” (Cornelius 17). This fear took root in an underlying appreciation for the power of education. Brandt shows her appreciation of the power of literacy when she likens it to a means of “upward mobility” (Brandt 47). Similar themes of sponsorship comprise the literacy experience of former slave Frederick Douglass in “Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass.”

Frederick Douglass is best known for being a former slave that acquired literacy and abolitionist influence after gaining freedom and founding his own newspaper, *The North Star*. In his literacy narrative, Douglass describes his struggle to acquire literacy as a slave while living with a family in Baltimore. Master Hughes, Frederick Douglass’ owner, demonstrates Cornelius’ and Brandt’s points about recognizing literacy as a route to slave liberation, and blocking that route to preserve the white advantage. Douglass’ narrative depicts one scene where Master Hughes forbids his wife to teach Douglass to read in a conscious effort to maintain his human property and preserve the slave system: “if you teach that nigger how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master.” (Douglass 274). Here we see Hughes defend his advantage in an attempt to deny Douglass of all literacy avenues that lead to empowerment. After this scene, the Hughes family is

diligent about literacy sponsorship.

Once aware of the slave-owner's motivation to sponsor, the reasons are clear in regards to why the Hughes family acted as they did in terms of Douglass and literacy. Once a positive literacy sponsor for Douglass, Mrs. Hughes became the primary roadblock on his journey to achieve literacy. Douglass notices this when he explains, "my mistress, who had kindly commenced to instruct me, had, in compliance with the advice and direction of her husband, not only ceased to instruct, but had set her face against my being instructed by anyone else" (276). This quote reveals just how diligently Mrs. Hughes, as a sponsor, worked to prevent literacy acquisition. We also see tangible examples of restrictions on Douglass. Regarding Mrs. Hughes, Douglass recalls, "I have had her rush at me with a face made all up of fury, and snatch from me a newspaper" (277). Her obsession with denying literacy reaches paranoia in some points of the narrative: "I was most narrowly watched. If I was in a separate room any considerable length of time, I was sure to be suspected of having a book" (277). It is tempting to think of the Hughes family as one extreme case of withholding literacy. However, we see the grand scale of this truly institutional sponsorship when looking at state laws of the time.

To gain a better understanding of the scope of sponsorship, consider one of the many anti-literacy laws common during the pre-antebellum period:

*South Carolina Act of 1740:
Whereas, the having slaves
taught to write, or suffering them
to be employed in writing, may
be attended with great*

*inconveniencies; Be it enacted,
that all and every person and
persons whatsoever, who shall
hereafter teach or cause any
slave or slaves to be taught to
write, or shall use or employ any
slave as a scribe, in any manner
of writing whatsoever, hereafter
taught to write, every such
person or persons shall, for every
such offense, forfeit the sum of
one hundred pounds, current
money" (PBS).*

The key word in the South Carolina Act of 1740 is "inconveniencies." Given the aforementioned potential for slaves to use literacy skills to achieve liberation, it is reasonable to conclude that South Carolina policymakers did not want to be inconvenienced by a struggle for Civil Rights that might inconvenience property-holding slave-owners. Brandt would likely consider this analysis of the slave system evidence of sponsors "sanctioning" literacy "trade routes" (Brandt 46). Literacy skills necessary for social mobility prove elusive when powerful sponsors (i.e., the American slavery institution) purposefully block literacy trade routes like formal schooling, mentoring, and exposure to literacy materials. Despite these great obstacles, Douglass eventually acquired literacy.

Ironically, the great efforts Mr. and Mrs. Hughes made to prevent Douglass from achieving literacy were the greatest motivation in his struggle to learn to read and write. In reference to Mr. Hughes' words on Douglass and literacy, Douglass explains his new motivation to learn: "the argument which he so warmly urged, against my learning to read, only served to inspire me with a desire and determination to

learn” (275). Douglass’ newfound motivation to learn is a result of sponsors shaping the attitude of the sponsored. Brandt refers to this idea when she notices how sponsors determine “cultural attitudes people develop” (46). In this case, the attitude shaping was counterproductive for the cause of the sponsor as it unintentionally contributed to literacy achievement. This motivation and Douglass’ determination proved to be formidable, especially considering his limited opportunity and materials.

Brandt’s idea of “the stratification of opportunity” becomes painfully clear when examining Douglass’ literacy events. Brandt contrasts the difference in opportunity between “affluent people from high-caste racial groups” to “low-caste racial groups,” and determines that the former has better access to sponsors that facilitate “academic and economic success” (49). Brandt’s comparison dovetails nicely with one story Douglass tells in his narrative. To paraphrase Douglass, his master’s son, Thomas Hughes, brought home writing books from school and Douglass secretly read and copied words from this book when he was home alone (Douglass 281). His narrative is full of examples that illustrate just how little access he had to empowering sponsors. Basically, Douglass’ classroom was a nearby shipping yard where he observed letters written on timber; his instructors were literate white boys from his neighborhood, which he had to feed or trick into teaching him. His supplies consisted of “a lump of chalk” and “board fence, brick wall, and pavement” (Douglass 281). Again, Brandt’s point of certain ethnic groups having access to empowering trade routes is clear when

comparing Thomas’ privilege of convenient and formal education to Douglass’ self-pursued “neighborhood” classroom. In addition to acknowledging stratified opportunity and limited access, Brandt identifies a technique that some individuals use to compensate for this limited opportunity.

Douglass acts as evidence to Brandt’s claim that some individuals find ways to develop personal literacy skills despite strict limitations from their sponsor. As already seen, Douglass sought literacy achievement in the face of a restrictive sponsor. However, he explains how he used bread from his masters’ cupboard to “buy” literacy lessons from starving white boys in the neighborhood (281). Douglass’ transaction of nourishment for literacy reinforces Brandt’s reference to the “potential of the sponsored to divert sponsors’ resources toward ulterior projects, often projects of self-interest or self-development” (Brandt 56).

With the end of slavery, the national institution of free public education for all, and even an African-American president, it may seem as though the United States has corrected the literacy crisis. Unfortunately, the national social structure still creates an inequality in literacy access and achievement. Brandt captures this ongoing crisis well: “a statistical correlation between high literacy achievement and high socioeconomic, majority-race status routinely shows up in results of national tests of reading and writing performance” (Brandt 49). We do not have to look far for an example of this statistic either. Compare the predominantly African-American Rochester City School District to the predominantly white school district in Pittsford. These neighboring districts

have drastically different graduation rates: Rochester City School District 53% and Pittsford School District: 98% (Zillow). These statistics reinforce the relationship Brandt suggests between race groups and literacy achievement. Literacy scholars work vigorously to confront this problem in a country that has, perhaps falsely, boasted itself on foundations of equality since its conception.

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