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Sponsors of Literacy for Pedagogical Purposes

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Abstract

Historically, the actions of classroom teachers have had a massive impact on the implementation of top-down reform efforts. However, a pedagogically-friendly construct for considering this impact has been lacking in studies of teacher practice. In this article, I draw on Deborah Brandt's concept of sponsors of literacy to build a construct for thinking about teacher actions with, against, and through the social and historical forces that work their way into the classroom: sponsorshaping. Through a grounded theory analysis of six different types of documents used in an Advanced English 11 writing classroom, I show how sponsors of literacy were "shaped" with and against each other through the authorial decisions of the teacher. Drawing on these results, I suggest ways in which sponsorshaping can be used actively by teachers and teacher educators to more carefully orchestrate demands that various sponsors of literacy have toward their own ends.

We were both hitchhikers but you had your ear tuned to the roar

Of some metal-tempered engine on an alien, distant shore

-Bruce Springsteen, "For You"

Much like the love Springsteen struggles with in "For You," teachers are often working in their classrooms with an ear turned outward, listening for the "metal-tempered engine" of pedagogical framing that will help them best resolve their unique classroom needs. Teachers often do this not only with the reforms (i.e., NCLB, CCSS) foisted upon them by outside pressures but through what Null (2010), building from organizational theory, refers to as "third socialization:" self-selected professional development opportunities, such as the National Writing Project. Teachers bring what they feel to be (based on past experience as a student, a student teacher, and a teacher) successful teaching practices into their classrooms, and their teaching decisions are informed by their past successes or failures with given teaching approaches.

The picture I've painted above seems to indicate that teachers have considerable curricular power in the classroom, and, to an extent, they do: teachers, historically, have possessed the

power to influence how and in what ways reforms enter their individual classrooms. As Cuban (1990, 2009) has often noted, top-down curricular reforms often short-circuit as soon as they enter the classroom if they fail to meet the daily needs of the teacher. This is not to say that all reforms are inherently bad or destined to fail, or that teachers as a rule dislike change and innovation: in fact, a great deal of the successful work that teachers do today is the result of the reform efforts of decades past (Cuban, 1990). I am simply arguing that teachers have a great deal of pull when it comes to the day-to-day implementation of school reform efforts, and the decisions that they make can have lasting and powerful effects on student learning. But what does this pull look like in the everyday attempts of teachers to create, organize, and execute their classroom plans? How can the work that teachers do representing, appropriating, and shaping the presence of reforms, mandates, and guidelines be characterized in a way that is useful for K-12 teachers and faculty in teacher education programs?

One helpful way to characterize this pull is through what Brandt (1998; 2001) refers to as "sponsors of literacy." However, Brandt's use of the term (and the use of others who have applied it to wide and varied situations), while incredibly thought-provoking and useful for researchers, can be challenging to work with for teachers and teacher educators in their quests to understand the limits and possibilities of K-12 teachers. To make the tracing of sponsors of literacy more clear, I add the term "sponsorshaping" to the study of sponsors of literacy. Through the use of both of these terms, teachers and teacher educators can more carefully consider their power in shaping the curricular tools that pervade their classrooms on a regular basis. In this teacher research study, I provide an analysis of course documents from my own advanced junior-level English course that reveals the complex and subtle ways that I shaped sponsors of literacy in my classroom.

"Sponsors of Literacy": Limits and Possibilities

The literate activity that we engage in throughout our lives is supported by powerful historical, social, and economic forces. These forces are realized locally through the everyday literate actions of individuals. Brandt (1998; 2001) explains these forces through the term "sponsors of literacy," defined 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" (Brandt, 1998, p. 166). Brandt (2001) uses sponsors of literacy as an analytic lens, identifying both structured opportunity (and suppression) and individual take-up of that opportunity (or inability to work through the suppression).

Brandt explored the work of sponsors of literacy across the lifespan. Other studies have used the concept of sponsorship to look at literacy opportunities in different settings and different timeframes. Each of these studies treats "sponsor" somewhat differently. In Pitcock (2000) and Hall (2003), the sponsors are specific people; although each person is presented to the sponsored through many forms of media. For Jacobs (2007), however, the sponsorship is much more distant: a brand of comic books, influencing the reading of people across decades. Brandt's initial and oft-quoted definition of sponsors of literacy allows for and even encourages this kind of variety, which helps to show—as Trager Bohley (2010; 2011), Donehower (2002; 2003), and Webb-Sunderhaus (2007) have done—how integrated sponsorship is with many other social pressures.

The complicated sponsorship of a megabookstore, as described by Trager Bohley (2005; 2010; 2011), indicates the interconnected nature of cultural norms, personal goals, and economic

standing regarding sponsors of literacy. She identifies megabookstores, such as Borders, as sponsors of a very specific kind of literacy that they encourage through specific decisions regarding employee focus, store layout, and literature accessibility. Trager Bohley studied a Borders in the Midwestern United States (2005) and in Singapore (2010; 2011) and found the megabookstore model of sponsorship reacting differently with different cultures. Donehower (2003; 2003) and Webb-Sunderhaus (2007), meanwhile, pointed out similar differences of sponsor-culture clash in Appalachia. They highlighted that choices of sponsorships have consequences for the sponsored that echo throughout other parts of their lives.

All of these studies clearly indicate the interconnected nature of sponsors of literacy, and show how sponsorship can be a phenomenon involving both immediate people and distant, abstract agencies (i.e., Borders). The work of Brandt and Clinton (2002) and Lenters (2012) fully fleshes out the separation between immediate and abstract sponsors, which allows for a separation of the immediate sponsoring activities of the classroom from those that enter the classroom from afar.

Brandt and Clinton (2002) take up the interaction of more distant sponsoring forces and local pressures through Latour's concept of Actor-Network-Theory (see Latour, 2005 for an overview). They propose "localizing moves," "global connects," "literacy-in-action," "sponsors of literacy," and "folding in" as ways of thinking about connections between "larger" social pressures and local literacy moves. Following Latour, they suggest that "larger" social pressures are not actually "larger," but are rather other localities that are able to project themselves into other situations through technology or interaction. Lenters (2012), in her study of a fifth-grade writing workshop, takes this approach also. She sees the writing workshop as a framed social interaction that connects, through the literature on writer's workshop that the teacher draws from, to distant social spaces even while it creates moments of "literacy-in-action" for the students in the classroom.

This move of Brandt and Clinton (2002) and Lenters (2012) serves as an avenue for studying teacher activity in the classroom through the lens of sponsors of literacy: these authors provide insight not only into how literacy works but how it is transported across times and distances, and how the local and the distant can be separated. Considering sponsors of literacy as projected from distant locations into the actions of the classroom allows us to consider more deeply how the teacher works with that projected sponsor in everyday classroom life. However, neither Brandt and Clinton (2002) nor Lenters (2012) explore the agency available to teachers in their everyday classroom life. To more effectively trace this agency, I invoke the term "sponsorshaping:" the ways in which local agents shape the sometimes-contradictory messages of distant sponsors as they enter the classroom. Describing the sponsorshaping that occurs in the classroom will reveal the power that classroom teachers have when representing, through talk, tools, and text, the sponsors in their classrooms. Through the data analysis process below, I demonstrate how the sponsors in my classroom during a junior-year, advanced-level high school English class were shaped by the decisions about presenting them in the texts that I wrote for the myriad needs that my class had.

Data Collection

Records accessed for this research were part of a larger, reflective project examining my own commenting practices in two advanced, high school-level English courses. I taught these

courses at a large, suburban high school in northeastern Pennsylvania between 2009-2011. To study the connections between student take-up of teacher commentary and the classroom culture, I collected course documents (syllabi, assignments, rubrics, sample papers), student work, and evidence of student-teacher interactions (email and written comments) related to the teaching of writing in two of my courses: my 2009-2010 Advanced English 10 course, and my 2010-2011 Advanced American Literature course. This data collection was focused mainly on a single-subject case study.

I examined these documents through the lens of Brandt's concept of "sponsors of literacy," expecting to find a single, unified set of sponsoring actions for writing instruction filtering from the public school system to the student through me. Instead, I found that the sponsoring influences I was attempting to trace were a good deal more complicated than I initially thought. At every turn, in fact, the sponsor of "public schooling" seemed to fragment. In order to get a clearer understanding of how sponsoring forces were interacting with one another, I applied a grounded theory analysis to a smaller corpus of documents, which I hoped would allow me to more carefully identify the complexities of sponsorship interaction. I selected the 2010-2011 school year, which had a wider set of documents, to trace sponsors of literacy. Table 1 shows the documents used for this analysis.

Table 1: Analyzed Documents

Syllabus	Essay Assignment Sheets
Letters to Parents	Prewriting Packets
Course Calendars	Scoring Rubrics

In the methodology of this teacher research study that follows, I am positioned as both the researcher and the teacher whose work is under study. I am the author of all of the writing listed in Table 1, which was completed leading up to and during the 2010-2011 school year. The methodology used below emerged from an analysis of the documents that began in 2012, giving me, as researcher, some time and distance from the materials, which enabled me to, as anthropologists say, "make the familiar strange" in order to perform the analysis.

Methodology

The analysis for this work followed a grounded theory approach as laid out by Saldana (2009) and Titscher, Meyer, Wodak, and Vetter (2010). A grounded theory approach to my own teaching materials was new to me, but its very newness—along with my subsequent time away from the high school classroom—allowed me to step back from my data and make the familiar strange once more. By attempting to trace the presence of sponsors, I became a novice to my own writing.

To understand how these sponsors were working, I coded my documents in several passes. First, I reviewed my documents carefully for chunks of text that either contextualized or described writing assignments in my classroom. I labeled these chunks of text according to the ways in which they introduced, supported, or connected to larger classroom needs the writing activity of the classroom. Labeling different chunks of texts in different documents in this way helped me understand how writing activity was represented in each document.

After the first round of coding was completed, I created a set of more generalized codes to connect my labels across documents—for example, the description of key tasks in a writing assignment, originally coded as "Preparation and Novel Analysis," was re-coded as "Task Assignment," so that other reading and writing-based tasks could be compared with it. These codes showed how writing contexts and purposes related to one another across documents.

My second round of coding created 44 codes that described how specific texts worked together to establish, support, and maintain understandings about writing activity and writing instruction in my classroom. I aligned these codes under six different headings that separated more general guidance for writing (i.e., the purpose of the course, the organization of activities) from specific writing demands (i.e., writing tasks) as well as the contexts for those tasks (i.e., establishing rapport, patterns of communication). In essence, these codes, when categorized and described, showed how I, as the instructor, created space in my class for writing activity. The separation of writing-focused and more general concerns allowed me to see how sponsoring forces showed their influence across documents and were presented in my writing again and again in different ways to help the class accomplish different tasks under the direction of the teacher.

This range of coding allowed me to connect specific elements of the classroom to the influence of specific sponsoring forces, as well as show those forces being used in different ways throughout the course documents. By following specific writing demands out through larger course organization and purpose decisions, I was able to identify the larger concerns that these writing demands emanated from, which led me to the clear identification of sponsors of literacy present in those demands. In the following section, I identify and label several key sponsors of literacy. I chose to provide common labels for these sponsors, in order to allow for the connection between the uniqueness of the course I worked with and the "larger" or "more distant" social forces that many classrooms must contend with.

Findings

As shown in Figure 1, the following sponsoring forces can be identified within the available documents:

1) *Schools of Education* ("School of Ed" code - see Comments 1, 2, and 8 in Figure 1): The training I received both as an undergraduate and as a graduate (I do not differentiate for the purposes of this study, since both occurred at the same school of education) are not only present in many documents but, in most cases, are the reason for the existence of such documents. The presence of this training is often in creating the blueprint or outline for the documents that are used. Schools of Education differs from the above two sponsors in that there is no exam or program to look forward to: rather, the School of Education tools serve as sensemaking mechanisms, as framings within which the later writing happens.

2) *Local School District* ("Local School District" code - see Comment 3 in Figure 1): This entity is the reason for the course itself. It made the decision to create an advanced level. Specific demands of the advanced-level English course also stem from the local school district. The local school district is also how the curricular work of the course is labeled—since the school board had to approve the curriculum for the course, its approval identifies it as a sponsor, rather than the teachers who wrote it. The return

for the Local School District's sponsoring actions is long term and big picture: vertically and horizontally aligned curricula assist with student success and school reaccreditation.

3) *Pennsylvania Department of Education* ("PDE" code - see Comment 4 in Figure 1): This entity determines the state standards, their associated assessment anchors, and state tests. In this classroom, the PDE shone through most powerfully in the testing demands (and schedule) that students were placed on, in addition to the test preparation materials.

4) *The College Board* ("College Board" code - see Comment 5 in Figure 1): This entity is behind the SAT, a test that many students in the course took that year. Part of the course is set aside to prepare students for the exam. The College Board's primary appearance was in reference to the SAT exam, although reference to Advanced Placement courses were sometimes made in later documents during the school year. Much like the PDE, the College Board provides materials and terminology that are used in the class to further prepare students for their exams and programs.

5) *Peers* ("Peers" code - see Comments 6 and 7 in Figure 1): Fellow teachers—those who shared my teaching beliefs and, oddly enough, some of those who hated it—contributed in many ways to my classroom as well. Their impact can be seen most powerfully in references to mutually agreed-upon actions that I mention throughout the documents I analyze. Agreeing to certain testing conditions, lesson foci, and student transfer protocols reduces confusion and curricular overlap for teachers, and assurances of this reduced confusion and curricular overlap tends to satisfy this sponsor.

These sponsors shape one another even without my action (although not in the classroom): for example, the PDE's (code 3) mandates shape the schools of education (code 1) in the state of Pennsylvania. However, these sponsors appear as separately motivated forces in my documents, and within those documents I take them up in different ways to create a direction for my course.

While sponsorshaping activity showed itself throughout the course documents, some serve as what Merton (1985) would refer to as a "natural microscope:" they cast sponsors into prominence, clearly identify their interactions, and underscore the power of the teacher in making those sponsors work together. Figure 1 identifies the interaction of sponsoring forces in my opening letter to parents at the beginning of the school year. It provides an excellent example of all five sponsors interacting with one another. This is a clear, powerful example of sponsors working together through the actions of the teacher to push classroom activity and representations of it in order to create and sustain a clear direction in the upcoming activity in the classroom. Since the letter serves to frame some of the later work done in the class, the sponsors can be seen working to lay the groundwork for future literate activity. Some identifying information has been removed from the letter.
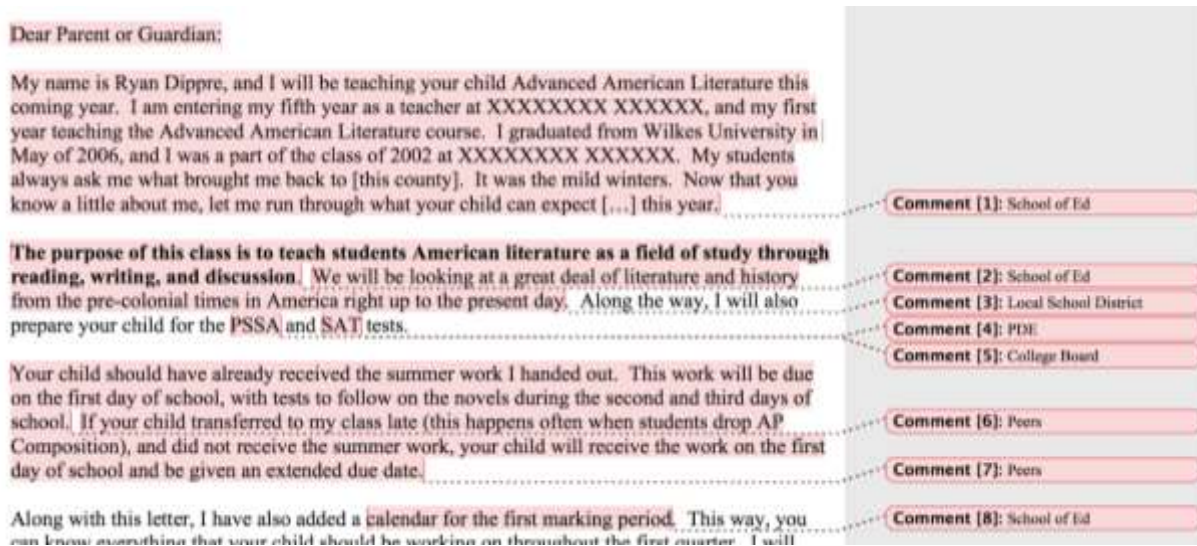
Figure 1: Letter to Parents - Coded by Sponsor Presence

In this document, all five sponsors of literacy are arranged by the writer to create a streamlined presentation of the course for the parents reading the letter. Each of these sponsors is shaped through its representation in the letter to create the appearance of a goal-focused, integrated course structure. First, the letter itself, as well as the calendar provided, is a result of training in a school of education. The "School of Ed" sponsor provides a blueprint into which other sponsors are placed. The "School of Ed" sponsor also indicated the importance of a unified curriculum, which is the boldfaced portion of the letter: "the purpose of this class is to teach students American literature as a field of study through reading, writing, and discussion." The two sentences that follow this purpose provide further detail about what it means to "teach students American literature," specifically, looking at literature and history from pre-colonial times to the present day, a purpose that has been shaped by the determinations of the "Local School District." The elaboration of the purpose also takes into account the "College Board" and the state tests established by the "PDE," which, while not the focus of attention (as the "Along the way" transition suggests), still plays a role in shaping the curricular decisions of the class and, thus, the way that the purpose of the class is enacted.

The idea of creating a purpose for the course, an idea generated by the "School of Ed" sponsor, is used as an organizing sponsor for presenting the details of "Local School District" demands, as well as the pressures of the "PDE" and the "College Board." In the letter to parents, I present these later sponsors as extended descriptions of the more powerful—both in its place in the paragraph and the boldfaced font—"School of Ed" sponsor.

Specific assignment policies are constructed in coordination with the work of peer teachers, and they shape how the sponsors invoked earlier in the document will play out in specific classroom circumstances. The homework due date and upcoming exams, for instance, are in alignment with the agreements that all advanced-level teachers made about the assessment schedule of summer work, "This work will be due on the first day of school, with tests to follow on the novels during the second and third days of school." Here, the sponsors supporting the reading that the students are doing--the local school district and the PDE, to name two--are pushed to the

background and not even directly mentioned so that I, through the letter, can address the daily logistics of assessing the summer reading.

The added explanation of late-added students, "If your child added my class late (this happens often when students drop AP Composition) your child will receive the work on the first day of school and be given an extended due date," is also the result of an agreement among AP and advanced teachers of how to deal with students who drop AP courses late in the school year or early in the summer. Note that a specific sponsor of literacy is mentioned in this sentence - the "College Board" (via AP Composition) - but, in this sentence, it focuses merely as an elaboration of the early marking period set-up as arranged by the teachers at the school. The specific assignment policies implemented through work with peers show how students' experiences with the literacy-based activities shaped through the "School of Ed," "Local School District," "PDE," and "College Board" will bear out in terms of specific classroom practice: through due dates and assessments within the contexts of the first grading period.

The letter to parents analyzed above, on its own, indicates sponsorshaping at work through writing, but does not, by itself, indicate that the shaping is of any long-term, curricular consequence. However, by drawing off of my coding methods mentioned above, I can connect the chunks of text in this document with chunks of texts in other documents that create, frame, and specify specific classroom writing activities and, in doing so, see how the shaping in this particular moment carries forward into the action that students take up, the language that students use, and the products that they create.

Another naturally microscopic moment that shows the sponsorshaping from the letter to parents carrying into other writing is the research paper prewriting packet. In this packet, the purpose of the class once again surges to prominence, as students are asked to engage in an analysis that "allows the reader to understand the work in a way that wouldn't be possible in a simple first reading"—a definition of how research is focused in American literature "as a field" was established in earlier writing assignments (a "School of Ed" sponsor reference - see Comment 2 in Figure 1). Later in the packet, students are provided with a series of terms to use as a starting point for their analysis. Some of these terms can be directly connected to the glossary of terms for the PDE, while others can be found in College Board preparation guides. In assembling this packet, then, I drew from the sponsors around me in much the same manner that I did to write the letter to parents at the start of the school year (see orchestration of Comments 2-5 in Figure 1). The pattern of using "PDE" and the "College Board" to support the purpose of the class as established by the "School of Ed" can be seen, in this analysis, as an established one within my classroom. In short, the shaping actions that I undertake in the letter shown in Figure 1 reverberate across the activities that my students and I engage in throughout the year.

Drawing from and orchestrating these sponsors of literacy certainly had their advantages. Students were provided with a clear, consistent purpose of the course, the purpose of the course aligned with their state testing and SAT testing needs in terms of terminology, and the activities they engaged in were similar to what other students in other classrooms were doing at similar points in time, no doubt reinforcing the feeling for them that they were doing what they "were supposed" to be doing. I, as a teacher, was rewarded for my commitment to these sponsors (shaped though they were) with high standardized test scores, student SAT success, and a minimum of flak from my peers or superiors. However, my decision to commit to these sponsors also limited other possibilities for the development of my course. Options for creative writing, as

well as writing in non-school genres, were cut off, along with the rich sets of sponsoring forces that those options carry with them.

The letter to parents, as mentioned earlier, shows particularly clearly several different sponsors of literacy working with and against each other through the representations of the teacher (see Figure 1). Their presence and activity, however, is not a foregone conclusion: rather, I, as teacher, represented these sponsors in specific ways to present my class to parents through a letter. The letter, then, shows that the teacher's arrangement of the phrasings and word choice shapes the presence of sponsors through documentation about course activity, and the packet that I write later in the year shows that this shaping moment is a powerful one, and influences later sponsorshaping activity.

Although the identified sponsors are present throughout the available documents, they did not dictate my actions as a teacher. They limited and constrained in some ways, but they also provided leverage with and against one another; they provided me with concepts and understandings to use to imagine and accomplish classroom goals. The breakdown of the documents (and their interactions with one another) shows how the sponsors integrated by the writing decisions for the construction of this letter created a clear course direction. These sponsors, in many ways, are resources for me to construct a direction for the course that is meaningful to students, parents, the school district, the PDE, and my own professional judgment. Different aspects of sponsors were brought together (i.e., shaped) to create coherent documents that inform and drive classroom activity.

Implications for Teaching

The idea of sponsorshaping—of the power of the teacher in twisting sponsors of literacy with and against one another through decisions of sponsor representation in order to accomplish classroom goals—can have a profound influence on how we think about teachers' teaching. As a great deal of other research has shown, teachers are not simply empty vessels executing the will of larger educational mandates, nor are they slaves to their education school training. Rather, teachers have the power to take the resources, limitations, and possibilities away from a great deal of distant, powerful sponsors of literacy and shape it to meet their own needs. This power is shown most clearly through the representative decision-making that teachers go through when representing sponsors. This impacts both teachers and teacher educators.

Classroom teachers can use this information to think more carefully and more strategically about the long-term effects of the compromises and decisions that they make when they organize curricula and decide upon representations of specific sponsors. Because of the immense daily pressures that teachers face, they cannot perform the kind of in-depth, grounded theory analysis described above. However, they can more carefully consider the ways that they take up the reforms presented to them. The Common Core is a major player in the current, test-driven landscape. The Common Core organizes many sponsors in the classroom, but gaps between standards and assessments (as well as any others that crop up during CCSS implementation) will demand continued sponsorshaping acts of teachers. Null (2010) has shown the limits of standardization, and these limits can be attributed to the ends of sponsor determination. Sponsors, as Brandt (2001) argues, demand allegiance in terms of the forms of literacy taught, but it would be wrong to assume that any individual sponsor demands allegiance through every single literate act performed by a person. All sponsoring forces can only demand so much allegiance, and

at the point where allegiance ends, teacher sponsorshaping may begin. By considering their sponsorshaping power, teachers can make use of this freedom to effectively implement the tools that reforms hand them.

Sponsorshaping can also be an important concept for teacher educators as they prepare their students for the challenges of the public school classroom. Encouraging student teachers to think about the demands on their classroom as sponsors of literacy in the lives of their students—and themselves as the shapers of the impact of those sponsors—can help those students think through curricular issues from a new perspective, which may enable them to more effectively bridge the gap between the demands of school reforms and the demands of their individual classes and the students in it. Their decisions about how and to what extent certain sponsors should be represented in their classrooms is an important one, and can become more deliberative through ongoing reflection. Furthermore, the idea of sponsorshaping can help students more calmly accept the growing demands of outside, sponsoring pressures on how they teach: since teaching is a never-ending act of juggling, orchestrating, and shaping sponsors, new curricular demands are, in a way, nothing new, and therefore something that teachers know they are up to handling successfully. In this sense, then, the concept of sponsorshaping can be emancipating for both teachers and teacher educators: they are not chained to the demands that sponsors of literacy send their way, but rather have power to shape those demands toward their own ends.

Considering the classroom and teacher activities in the classroom through the lens of sponsors and sponsorshaping opens up new ways of thinking about how teachers and teacher educators can approach the process of teaching. They act as concepts that reframe how teachers can see themselves: instead of being yoked to the demands of different, ever-changing reform movements, teachers can see themselves as active agents in the translation, application, and re-mediation (Prior & Shipka, 2003) of the demands of different reform agendas as they filter through the school system. Furthermore, this viewpoint is not mere wishful thinking: rather, as the analysis above indicates, teachers are always actively shaping the sponsors of literacy they encounter, and considering the act of teaching from this perspective merely reveals the power that teachers often unknowingly carry with them.

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