MY LITERACY JOURNEY

ENG W131: SECOND PLACE

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Abstract

This essay is a narrative about the author's literacy journey and the fantastic literacy sponsors who guided her during her journey with literacy. It describes the hardships the author faced as a young child, from losing her mother to finding solace through reading. The author explains how she struggled with grammar and writing as a teenager but overcame her "fear of the red pen" with the guidance of an incredible high school teacher, Mrs. V. Finally, she discusses her literacy journey as an adult and the literacy sponsors who guided her, illustrating how, with their help, she realized that her dream of furthering her academic career was not out of reach.

We encounter new situations and opportunities to learn and grow as time passes. This holds for our literacy journeys as well. In her article "Sponsors of Literacy," Deborah Brandt defines literacy sponsors as people who pass their literacy knowledge on to others for either private or mutual gain. Brandt talks about how through these sponsors and the education they provide, people are afforded the opportunities to improve their literacy and socioeconomic situations (Brandt, 2020, pp. 244-262). I agree with Brandt's reasoning because my literacy experiences and the sponsors willing to guide my literacy growth have significantly influenced my literacy journey.

The beginning of my literacy journey starts like most children, learning from my mom. It was always important to my mother that my sister and I succeed. She wanted us to have the best opportunities

in life. She also loved reading; I can recall times when we would all be in the living room watching T.V., and she would be curled up in her favorite chair reading a novel. I remember being young, around four years old, and her working with me on learning my ABCs, writing my name, and learning to read. During the day, we would often sit and practice writing and reading together. I remember being so excited when I started kindergarten, coming home every day proudly showing her the beautiful things I had created and telling her all the fantastic new things I had learned. She would come into my and my sister's room and read us bedtime stories at night. I have fond memories of curling up next to her while my sister snuggled the other side as she began to read from one of our favorites, like one of our many *Dr. Seuss* or *Rainbow Fish* books. I still treasure these memories; I recognize these precious years as the beginning of my relationship with literacy.

Everything was beautiful until the end of my kindergarten year when my mother tragically passed away. To say that my family was devastated is probably one of the biggest understatements I will ever make. After her death, my life was thrown into chaos. My father, newly burdened with raising two young girls on his own, soon began drinking heavily and remarried within a year of her passing. My sister and I quickly became an afterthought to him and my stepmother, as did our education. After her death, the one thing that I managed to hold onto was reading. After my mom's funeral, I remember being sad and wanting a little routine after the chaotic day. I asked my dad if he would read a bedtime story to me, which was our nightly tradition. He agreed, telling me to go to bed and that he would be in shortly. After waiting for an extended period, I realized he wasn't coming. So, I got a book and started reading it to myself; I continued to do so every night after that. Reading became my solace over the years, a way to retreat from the harsh realities of the world. It also felt like a way to hold onto her, as if her love of reading was carrying on through me.

As the years progressed, it seemed as if my dad and stepmom

were too wrapped up in their problems to care about what we were doing. We both regularly missed school; we quickly began to fall behind our peers academically. The situation was bad enough that my dad and stepmom were investigated several times because of our truancy. Nothing ever came of the investigations; they would always make excuses to avoid trouble for neglecting us, and we would be made to go to school every day. Our well-being wasn't the only thing they neglected. They were often behind on utility payments and in trouble with law enforcement and our landlords. Their solution to these predicaments was inevitably the same. After a few months, we would move; they would slowly start to forget our presence again and the cycle would begin anew. As an adult, I am now aware that the root of their predicaments stemmed from excessive alcohol use, but as a child, it was difficult to understand why it seemed as if no one cared what happened to us. It became easy to adopt the mentality of, "well if no one else cares if I get an education, then why should I care?"

Eventually, when I was around twelve years old, my sister and I moved in with our grandparents. By this time, I was in middle school, and the absences and constant switching schools—between first grade and seventh grade, I attended four different elementary schools and two different middle schools—had left me very behind in my education. My grandparents tried to encourage us to do well in school, but by this time, we both were more than a bit wild and hard to manage. In school, English was never my strong suit. While I enjoyed reading and writing as a way of self-expression, I struggled with spelling and grammar. I believe that a contributing cause to this was the environment that I grew up in. Most of my family is either from a very secluded mountain town in Virginia or rural areas in Indiana and Kentucky. Predictably, almost all of them speak with a heavy "hillbilly" accent.

My accent was never quite as bad as some, but these interactions still greatly impacted how I comprehended and expressed grammatical information. My "country" way of speaking seemed to

be the bane of my teacher's existence; they were constantly trying to correct my grammar. In the section "Two Stories about Writing" in our textbook *Writing about Writing* (2020), Wardle and Downs discuss how most students learn that correct grammatical usage is more important than concept development (Wardle and Downs, 2020, pp. 5-6). This was what I encountered during my junior high and into my high school career. On written assignments, my papers were always returned marked entirely with a red pen. Teachers focused more on correcting my grammar than helping me develop my ideas. I began feeling terrible anxiety whenever I had to complete a writing assignment because I knew that no matter how much thought I put into it, the paper would inevitably not be good enough. As I progressed through junior high, my grades stayed terrible, and I pretty much learned to skate by enough to pass. I figured, "Why make an effort to try since I did not seem to be any good at it?"

Everything changed during my junior year of high school. This was when I was first exposed to what Wardle and Downs describe as the second side of the literacy story, one that puts more stock in content development and its processes; correct grammar is only a small portion (Wardle and Downs, 2020, pp. 6-7). At our school, two teachers taught junior and senior English. I was lucky enough to be assigned to Mrs. V. for both years. The first assignment that year was writing a poem. I had always felt less threatened when writing poetry, because the rules of grammar are less stringently followed. It has been so long ago that I cannot remember what type of poem we were supposed to be writing, but I remember that I had chosen to write about my mom and her death. I put a lot of thought into the assignment; I was apprehensive about turning it in. I still remember the day we got our assignments back. Mrs. V. slowly made her way around the room, handing papers back. I sat fidgeting in tense silence, trying not to watch her slow progression around the room but unable to focus on anything else. Finally, she stopped in front of me. Before

handing me the paper, she told me that she was very impressed with my work; I had captured the idea of the assignment perfectly. She said she was very moved by what I had written and handed me the paper. Even though there were the expected red pen marks, I had astonishingly received 90% on the assignment. This was the first time I had gotten a good grade on a rough draft; I was so shocked that as she walked away, all I could give in response was a shaky little laugh. To say that I did well for the rest of the year was an understatement. Grammar was essential, after all it was an English class, however not as important. The writing was more about figuring out what you wanted to say, how to capture those ideas on paper. I began to lose my fear of the red pen. Even though I still felt apprehensive when I started to write, I learned just to let it go and get it all out.

After high school, I did not initially consider continuing my education; college seemed like an expensive dream only meant for those kids who were either bright or came from wealthy backgrounds. Since college did not seem like an option, I entered the workforce. I had a couple of different customer service jobs in my early twenties. During this time, with the help of various literacy sponsors, namely the managers at the businesses where I worked, I overcame what I consider one of my biggest literacy hurdles. When I first started working, I noticed that people treated me differently depending on the way that I spoke to them. Anytime that I spoke to customers in a more professional manner, instead of talking to everyone as if they also came from "back in the hollar," I was treated with more respect. In her article "From Outside, In" Mellix discusses her experience growing up speaking dual languages, what she refers to as "Black English" and "Standard English." She developed a "doubleness" while learning how and when to alternate between these two distantly different ways of speaking depending on the location, people present, and situation. (Mellix, 2020, pp. 337-348). Like Mellix, as I became more familiar with communicating professionally, I began to embrace the

concept of "doubleness" and it became almost second nature to switch between speaking styles. Also, as my professional experience and skills increased, my qualifications increased. Eventually, I became qualified enough to move out of routine customer service jobs and acquire an entry-level position in veterinary medicine.

When I initially saw the posting for a veterinary assistant position on my veterinarian's Facebook page, my reaction was to wish I had the qualifications to apply for a professional job like that. Despite this sentiment, my curiosity led me to continue reading the posting; as I read the basic duties, I realized that I had qualifications due to my experience with animals (I had always had personal pets of various species) and my experience as an administrative assistant. I decided to give it a shot, printed out a copy of my resume, and headed to the office to fill out an application. Even though I had no previous experience in the veterinary field, the office manager Jamie was impressed with my professionalism, confidence, and how quickly I had responded in person to the job posting. That day she invited me to do a working interview the following week. After two days, I had the job. While I worked there, Jamie encouraged me to start paying attention and learning more about veterinary medicine. Unfortunately, I did not work there for a long period of time. About six months after I started, my husband received an offer for a better job in his hometown; a few months later we moved. I was, however, able to use the skills I had acquired working in the veterinary clinic to get a job at the local animal shelter when we moved. A few months after working as an Animal Control Officer, a veterinarian that worked with the shelter offered me a position working in their clinic. This is where I met one of the most significant literacy sponsors of my adult life.

When I started working at my new clinic, the head technician Rachel and I immediately became friends. In the years I have worked with her, she has taught me most of what I know about veterinary medicine. As my knowledge and experience increased through her

tutelage, the veterinarians began to entrust me with more medically relevant tasks. After about a year, Rachel encouraged me to return to school to expand my knowledge and understanding of veterinary medicine. As I said before, I had never given much thought to continuing my education other than considering it an unattainable dream. I struggled with the idea of returning to school, constantly asking myself if it was possible for a country girl raised by "backwoods hillbillies" to become a college graduate and a licensed veterinary professional to boot. I struggled with these thoughts for quite some time, even though I had this hidden desire to continue my education. "For years, afraid and a little embarrassed, I did no more than imagine this different me, this possible me" (Mellix, 2020, p. 342). Eventually, Rachel's encouragement and my latent ambitions to be a college graduate won out, and I began a new journey in academia. After I decided to get my Associate Degree in Veterinary Technology, Rachel became my teacher and tutor. She helped me navigate all the complicated medical subjects and taught me how to apply what I had learned in school in real-life situations. She also helped me understand the complex language of veterinary medicine.

When learning a new language, one of the biggest hurdles is feeling comfortable enough to use it in real-world situations; this ultimately leads to becoming successfully fluent in said language. At first, I struggled to speak or write in medical terms; I often tried to revert to layman's terms when communicating. Rachel continuously encouraged me to use the language of our profession. For example, instead of writing in an animal's chart that they had been seen for drinking and peeing a lot, she would encourage me to write something along the lines of, "Trixie presented at the clinic on said date for polyuria and polydipsia." After time and through Rachel's constant tutelage, I became more comfortable using medical terms. As Mellix wrote, "I had to learn to imagine myself a part of the culture of that language, and therefore someone free to manage that language, to

take liberties with it" (Mellix, 2020, p. 346). Now it has become second nature for me to speak using a medical vocabulary; I have to stop myself from using veterinary terms in everyday conversation with people who would have no idea what I was referring to. Without Rachel's guidance, I don't believe I would have ever found a way to overcome my fears of mediocrity and realize that I was capable and deserving of a college education.

As time passes, we are constantly presented with new situations and opportunities to interact with others with valuable literacy skills they can teach us. My literacy history has been a long and winding road. However, through my experiences and with the help of others, I have learned to grow as both a writer and a person. My literacy journey is what led me here, to the end my first semester at IU East. I know that without each sponsor and the literacy knowledge they provided, I would never have found the courage to continue furthering my education, and I would not be the person I am today. ■

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