Brandt defines a “literary sponsor” as any agent, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enables, supports, teaches, or regulates literacy learning. These sponsors often gain something in return, whether directly (e.g., repayment) or indirectly (e.g., enhanced status or influence) (166-167). Characteristics of literacy sponsors include being more powerful, resourceful, or knowledgeable than the sponsored. Sponsors often set the terms for access to literacy and wield considerable influence, sometimes coercively. They represent economic, cultural, or political systems that shape how literacy is delivered and valued, often reflecting broader power structures. For instance, schools, workplaces, and even family members can act as literacy sponsors, determining how, when, and why literacy is acquired or practiced.

The sponsored often “misappropriate” literacy by redirecting resources toward their own goals or interests. Brandt highlights examples like African Americans in slavery using church-sponsored literacy to support liberation efforts or women in clerical roles adapting workplace literacy to personal or religious pursuits (179). Misappropriation occurs when individuals leverage skills they’ve learned to meet their own needs, which may diverge from their sponsors’ intentions. From my own experience, I’ve seen students take academic writing skills, such as crafting arguments or conducting research, and apply them to creating social media campaigns, starting online blogs, or writing advocacy letters for causes unrelated to their coursework. Personally, I have used skills like writing persuasive essays and analyzing data to advance personal projects, such as organizing group events, creating compelling presentations, or even improving communication in relationships.

Brandt’s concept of literacy sponsorship could be extended to explore how AI and digital tools serve as modern literacy sponsors. Platforms like Duolingo, Grammarly, or coding tutorials provide structured literacy in areas like languages and programming. However, these platforms are often driven by commercial interests, such as advertising revenue or data collection. For example, while free versions of these tools provide basic functionality, premium users gain full access to advanced features, such as personalized feedback, in-depth analysis, or unlimited practice opportunities. This tiered system raises concerns about whether such platforms truly democratize literacy or perpetuate digital inequalities by favoring those who can afford premium access.

This stratified access resembles historical examples of literacy sponsorship, where economic or social barriers restricted access to higher levels of education or resources. For instance, just as the Industrial Revolution created disparities in access to literacy depending on one’s socioeconomic status, today’s digital tools can similarly limit opportunities for less privileged groups. In addition, the reliance on user data and algorithm-driven personalization introduces ethical questions about how these platforms influence learning experiences. AI sponsors may prioritize content or approaches that align with their commercial goals, subtly shaping not only how knowledge is accessed but also what is considered valuable or important to learn. This raises broader questions about how power and profit motives intersect with literacy in the digital age.

This line of research connects to my project on AI as a human companion, where I could investigate how AI “sponsors” shape the way individuals learn and interact with knowledge. AI assistants such as ChatGPT can act as sponsors by providing guidance, answering questions, or helping users develop skills. However, they also embody the values and goals of their creators, which may influence how knowledge is framed. I find this topic intriguing because it highlights the intersection of technology, literacy, and power. A potential downside, however, is that focusing solely on sponsorship might overlook individual agency and creativity, portraying learners as passive recipients rather than active participants in their own literacy journeys.