

Athletics and Literacy; How Sport Has Shaped My Intelligence

Literacy, as we understand it in our world, is one of the most valuable forms of currency. Not only does being literate unlock a plethora of opportunities professionally, but it also provides people with a high social footing and a deep understanding of the world and its trials. Literacy is often absorbed through mentors or other institutions of learning, like teachers, universities, libraries, and even religious figures. **As Deborah Brandt explains, literacy sponsors are “agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, and model literacy” (Brandt 166)** These sponsors can provide support for or increase accessibility to the development of literacy in an individual, and often benefit from it in some way. (Brandt 166) I can identify multiple literacy sponsors that have enhanced my understanding of the world and expanded my knowledge. Namely, these are my coaches, my skating federation, USA Roller Sports, and my experience traveling to foreign countries to compete for Team USA. Being a professional athlete has built me as a person; I truly don't believe that I would have half of the life skills, experiences, and intelligence that I do without my sport. Artistic roller skating has been my passion since I was 4 years old. The work and level of diligence that is required to compete in a subjective sport like my own is unlike any other pursuit I have taken on. Due to this, I consider my coaches to be my biggest literacy sponsors. Deborah Brandt describes the symbiotic relationship between mentors and ordinary people, which I can interpret as the relationship between coach and athlete. She states that “literacy as a resource becomes available to ordinary people largely through the mediations of more powerful sponsors” (Brandt 166). **These “more powerful sponsors” are key to the transfer of knowledge and the development**

of individuals. (Brandt 166) This idea applies to my experience in athletics, where coaches act as sponsors by guiding athletes and shaping their skills over time.

One of my coaches, Marina Zoueva, is an Olympic ice skating coach and choreographer who has coached many athletes to Olympic gold medals. Her influence has shaped my knowledge not only of figure skating but also improved my understanding of music, language, and body mechanics. **For example, during one of my training sessions, Marina stopped my program and explained how my timing did not match the phrasing of the music. She had me listen closely to the rhythm and adjust my movements so they aligned with the emotional tone of the piece.** Marina has imparted onto me her knowledge of classical music through the choreographies that she has created for me, ultimately making me understand the correct construction of a program. The interpretations of music, mathematical musical phrasing, as well as critical listening skills to make sure that the choreography correctly correlates with the music's meaning **are very important to its quality.** I use many of the skills I learned from her in my life, given that I am now a skating coach. When I edit music for my athletes, create choreography for their competitions, and select music for them, I am always invoking the skills that I learned from her and my other coaches. Other than that, my knowledge of classical music has also helped me in school. I have taken many music and performance art classes, where having previous knowledge of choreography composition and music has helped me immensely.

Next, my literacy is derived from learning the science behind how the human body works. Being an athlete requires an immense understanding of the mechanisms that allow our bodies to move, and more importantly, perform at a high level for sport. **For instance, I have learned how important recovery is through injury prevention strategies such as stretching routines, proper nutrition, and rest periods between training sessions. I have also**

experienced how overtraining can negatively impact performance, which has taught me to balance effort with recovery. Having this understanding has allowed me not only to train my own body—knowing when to push, when to rest, and how to recover—but it has also given me the ability to coach my skaters to success. All these skills that my literacy sponsors have taught me **have** given me access to athletic achievement, but also access to creating a business for myself. The literacy of sport that my coaches have taught me has allowed me to impart that knowledge onto younger athletes. By becoming a coach, I have had great success financially that supports my athletic journey and my life. In summary, these reasons have shown how the biggest literacy sponsors in my life are my coaches and trainers who have supported my skating career.

The next literacy sponsor that I attribute my shaping of intelligence to is my skating federation, USA Roller Sports. Specifically, I attribute my ability to speak multiple languages and knowledge of other cultures to traveling the world for roller skating competitions to my sport and its federation. Those in charge of my federation have done a lot of work for us as athletes to make sure that we are equipped to travel and even set up our itineraries for travel and lodging when we represent the USA at major international competitions. Without the help of my skating federation, I would not have had many of the life experiences that have shaped me. While we are focused on competing while staying in these foreign countries, it is impossible not to absorb the local culture. I have learned so much about cuisine, lifestyle, politics, and the customs of other countries all due to my sport and the federation's help with organizing and planning. In return, we pay subscriptions as well as entry fees to our federations to compete, which helps them to evolve and advance their role in our careers and the development of our sport. This connects to Brandt's idea of the exchange that happens between literacy sponsors and individuals, where she says that an institution "follows the transformations going on within sponsoring institutions as

those institutions fight for economic and ideological position.” (Brandt 177) I can easily relate this to the institution that sponsors me, as they fight to give us the experience of competing, the knowledge to perform at a high level, and the resources to accomplish results, they are also in turn receiving funding and recognition in the sport through our athletic and literary development.

One of the biggest developments of my literacy that is derived from travel is cultural and practical understanding of transportation. Having the opportunity to travel has forced me to gain skills that I otherwise would not have needed. Traveling can be very confusing; navigating airports, speaking with attendants in foreign languages, and dealing with travel hiccups, among many other things. These trials have allowed me to grow as an adult with practical skills. For example, after finishing competing at the World Roller Games in Rimini, Italy, I had to travel 2 hours away to another city with 3 suitcases. Not only was I alone, but I also had to navigate the Italian train system all in Italian. Although I was nervous, I was able to successfully and safely make it to my destination. This was a huge learning experience for me, which made me obtain very important real-world skills. This is yet another way that skating has acted as one of my literacy sponsors.

Along with the development of cultural understanding through travel experience, I have also gained an invaluable social capital: the ability to speak Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, and Russian. Through training and competing at international events, I have had the opportunity to travel to many different countries and work with many coaches from South America, Europe, and Russia. It is because of this that my love for language learning developed, and it has been a part of how I communicate for much of my life. After having worked with foreign coaches in my sport, it became apparent to me that learning their native languages would help me not only to better understand them, but also have the words to ask more fulfilling and informational

questions, given that we would be communicating in their comfortable language. Speaking in many languages has also unlocked an entire other world of connection for me, as many of my closest friends are Spanish and/or Portuguese-speaking. Without my polyglotism, many people who have shaped me in the most positive ways would not even be an aspect in my life.

Additionally, being a polyglot has entirely altered the way that I communicate and interact with the world. Vershawn Ashanti Young, the author of “Should Writers Use They Own English?” has described intensively that the meshing and mixing of languages and language dialects doesn’t contribute to misunderstanding in society – in fact, it allows us to communicate more clearly. He says that “Code meshing allows writers and speakers to bridge multiple codes and modes of expression that others say are unmixable.” (Young 116) This makes a lot of sense to me, as having the ability to speak 4 languages helps me to bridge gaps between me and others in more ways than just spoken language.

Often in language, the ways that sentences are created and the nuances of the language reflect the culture that it is spoken by. Due to this, I have been able to not only comprehend the cultural practices and ideologies of others, but I also can reflect on my own upbringing and compare them. Additionally, my use of language has evolved to help me express myself better. Combining languages helps me to convey my thoughts in a way that wouldn’t be possible if I was monolingual. “Spanglish,” or the combination of Spanish and English, is a mix of languages that many of my close friends and I use when speaking to each other. This is because to many who speak multiple languages, it is common that some ideas are understood when spoken in a different language. Some words and ideas exist in some languages, while others don’t. One example of how I use code meshing is when speaking with my friends from Colombia, I will switch between English and Spanish since they also speak English. I would say something like

“¿Cómo fue tu free dance?” meaning, “how was your free dance?” In skating terms, the free dance is the long program; however, in Spanish, this would be called “danza libre.” I simply switch to English for these words because it makes the most sense to me, and often will just appear in my vernacular in English rather than Spanish. This makes “code meshing,” a term coined by Young, an advancement in linguistic understanding rather than a setback in ability and comprehension. Young states that “code meshing blends dialects, international languages, local idioms, chat-room lingo, and the rhetorical styles of various ethnic and cultural groups...” (Young 114) It is because of this that I have developed such meaningful friendships with athletes and friends from other countries, because the way that we communicate has allowed us to not only understand each other linguistically, but also culturally. This relates back to my switching of the words “free dance” to “danza libre.” The mixing of these cultures and words is an example of how code meshing has allowed me to connect with my friends from other countries and for us to understand each other better.

All in all, literacy sponsors are all around us, and the literacy that we derive from them is imperative to our success as individuals. In my own experience, my literacy has acted as a sort of currency that has bought me an athletic career, a professional coaching career, knowledge and understanding of different cultures, and multilingualism. All of these have not only augmented my comprehension of language and culture, but also allowed me to have more diverse perspectives on the world. Traveling for skating competitions has gifted me practical, linguistic, and travel skills that I otherwise would not have obtained in my normal life. Ultimately, my coaches, my federation, and my travel experiences have been my biggest literacy sponsors. Aside from this, the languages that I am able to speak due to my travel and coaching experiences have allowed me to evolve my communication abilities with others. Code meshing is a skill that I use

day-to-day, and it has allowed me to deepen my understanding of culture and broaden my relationships, overall fulfilling me more than if I were monolingual. In this way, code meshing is yet another ability that I have gained through my literacy sponsors. Both ideas from Brandt and Young are demonstrated through key aspects of my intelligence. Skating is my biggest literacy sponsor and has given me a plethora of life skills, including linguistic ability that allows me to code mesh language for better communicative understanding.

Works Cited

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