

The CEA Forum

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NEW VOICES:

ENDURING BASIC WRITING

[Pamela Bourgeois](#)

"Who owns writing?" asks Doug Hesse in his 2005 address to the Conference on Composition and Communication (335). He answers this provocative question fully and thoughtfully by concluding that we the writing faculty, members of the CCCC (and NCTE) are the caretakers, the owners of writing. However, Hesse challenges us not to own writing as "colonists or profiteers, but as stewards" (355). A steward is a manager or caretaker who acts in the best interest of others. If we are stewards of writing, on whose behalf are we working? As educators, we must respond that we are working on behalf of our writing students. And this response includes all of our writing students along the continuum. For too long, writers in basic writing classes have been regarded as those who only consume the resources of the academy. But if we are to see them as writers along a continuum, then we must see that writers in these classes have a claim to these resources. And as stewards of writing, we must introduce them to their own ownership of writing.

This article addresses this issue of basic writing, demonstrating how one university's basic writing program acts as a steward of writing. We reject the assumption that basic writers only consume resources rather than contribute to academic excellence. What links my responses to this issue is a publication of student writing entitled *New Voices* which we use as a supplemental text in all of our basic reading and writing classes.

New Voices, aptly named for students who are "new" to the university and who are from families who are likely to be "new" to mainstream educational culture, is a collection of writing by students in the English Department's Developmental Writing Program at California State University, Northridge, a large urban university located in the San Fernando Valley in northwest Los Angeles. This basic writing program serves more than 1500 students each year and draws students from many different ethnic, economic, and religious backgrounds. Many of these students are the first in their families to attend a university or even to graduate from high school. While there are some international students in the Developmental Writing Program, most of the students are graduates of local high schools who have not received a score on the CSU system-wide English Placement Test that qualifies them for placement into the first-year General Education required writing course. The program consists of two courses below the first year writing course: Developmental Reading, English 097, and Developmental Writing, English 098. To use William Lalicker's term, ours is a "prerequisite model," a program in which students must complete courses before taking the GE or first-year writing course. However, it differs from his description in that our students are not taught a skills-level curriculum. Instead, we begin with rhetorical reading and writing. Our lower-level developmental reading course stresses the reading process, student responses to reading, summarizing, dialogic reading with annotations, and rhetorical reading. Our writing course begins with essay writing and focuses on the writing process in its entirety, from invention to publication. Students in both courses are evaluated by portfolio. The instructors who teach in the program are experienced part-time lecturers, many of whom have been teaching at Cal State Northridge for many years.

Who owns writing? History of *New Voices*

New Voices originated during a discussion at the first developmental-writing faculty meeting of 1991. Since our faculty had already recognized the benefits that portfolio evaluation had had on the program, aligning our evaluation tool with our curriculum and process pedagogy (Belanoff and Dickson), the faculty discussed other ways that writing classes could provide more support and opportunities for students to write and to share writing, thereby forming the students into a campus community of academic writers. A publication of our students' writing would reflect these programmatic objectives. *New Voices*, the faculty decided, would not only showcase their students' writing, but would also provide concrete examples of the kinds of student writing we expect in the program. While both the NCTE and the CCCC stress the importance of student access to reading from both published and student writing (7), and while the portfolio aligns our evaluation procedures with process theory, *New Voices* offers models of writing that we expect in our portfolio, and writing that other students can emulate. It would also provide enduring testimony of our students' writing successes.

The portfolio of the basic writers in Developmental Writing requires a narrative essay, an essay based on a response to a text, an argument, a sample of in-class writing, and a reflective letter in which the student writer points out how s/he has understood the rubric of the course and applied it successfully to the papers in the portfolio. As an on-going assessment of the portfolio evaluation, the faculty discussed strategies for presenting our students with the kinds and quality of writing that we expect in their final portfolios. Our student writers, we all agreed, would benefit from student models. We decided to publish a collection of student writing to be edited by the faculty. Such a publication could

provide students with samples of the genres of writing required for the portfolio as well as writing that reflects the standards of the program. The publication would also show the connection between reading and writing, one of the basic principles of our program. *New Voices* has been published annually since 1991. We chose the name because we wanted to signal that these were new writers, students who had something to say from their marginalized position. We wanted them to have a publication in which their voices could be heard and where they could have an impact on others like themselves. These new writers could encourage other student writers coming after them by demonstrating that they too were members of the academic community through their writing. We expanded the response to Hesse's question by including student writers placed in basic writing classes and their teachers as owners and responsible stewards of writing.

Who owns writing? Student Voices

What do students know? What can they do? Wanting to focus on what students know and what they bring to the class, rather than working from a deficit model, we decided to ask our students: What can students do? Their submissions to *New Voices* provide some telling answers. And so do student responses to the questionnaire I sent out, asking them for their opinions about *New Voices*. Over five hundred and fifty students responded to a questionnaire sent out this past fall, asking them about the usefulness of *New Voices* in their classrooms. Their own voices came through clearly, with 76% of them acknowledging that they would like to have an essay published in *New Voices*, for several different reasons. Some said they would like to show how they had improved as writers and to be recognized for this effort. Some said they would like to help others, to show how other students can improve their writing. Still other writers said they wanted their own voices to be heard, and they desired to have the same impact on students in their situations that other students' writing had had on them. Some said it would boost their confidence to have something published in *New Voices*.

Who owns writing? Other responses from student writers in basic writing classes clearly claim that student writers are owners of writing as well. In fact, student writing plays an important role in developing student interest in reading and writing, and in building confidence in developing these academic skills.

In reviewing the questionnaires, I found that student responses could be divided into several categories. Most students said they could "relate" to the writing of their peers or "to students like me," or "to students my own age." Others valued *New Voices* because the essays in the publication gave them concrete models of the kinds of essays they were assigned to write. And others said they could come up with writing ideas based on what other students wrote about. They found motivation in the essays that students wrote. Many said that if these students could write and be published, then they could too. Or at least write well enough to pass the class. Many of them wrote that when they read these essays they felt they were "not alone" in this kind of class, or being this kind of writer. Most of them relished the content of the essays, and the positions other students took on the issues. Large numbers of students who submitted questionnaire responses told how intimidated they often were when reading professional writing, and felt that they were expected to write with the same expertise. Many of the responders said that because the essays of fellow students were not perfect, they were not intimidating. I learned that professional writing, typically included in readers and used as models, can often silence students in basic writing classes.

In praising student writers in *New Voices*, one student wrote: "Their experiences are similar to mine. We were forced to learn a new language and to write in it as well. I like the voices I hear from the essays. I feel I can do the same if I want to" (Beatriz). Tatiana said, "It feels like I knew the person who wrote the essay." Thomas writes: "You get a good picture and start relating their situation with ours." "I relate better to people my own age," claims Anel. Ofelia writes: "I like reading student essays because I realize those students were in my position. Their stories are appealing." And Edwin says, "I like reading the works of my fellow peers because I can relate to them. Reading an essay by a fellow student makes me see clearer and better about what I am reading." Ji "likes the voices I hear; student essays are more convincing." And Joe writes: "I like that there are different ethnic backgrounds, and you can hear and relate to their stories." Farid agrees: "You tell yourself if that student did it, then I can do it too." And Gladys confides: "Reading essays by students like me motivates me because I know if they can write an interesting essay, I can write one too."

In comparing student essays with professional essays, our students give us a glimpse of what it is like to be an inexperienced reader, and now important it is for them to be given something to read that they can understand, enjoy and relate to as well. Many student writers feel silenced, shut out of the conversation, when they only read professional writers before they are ready. They respond: "Professional writers are hard to understand because we are out of their league." Their writing is "more complex", they use "harder vocabulary," and they are "too perfect." The last description gave me pause. While perhaps experienced readers such as university faculty enjoy being challenged and enchanted by new vocabulary, deft phrasing, and complex and intricate thinking, less experienced readers/writers experience frustration, dread, and even hopelessness. The professional writers present a hard, slick surface to these writers, and they cannot find their way into these texts. But student writing that is actually published offers them a way into text. Student writers relate to the topics, the voices, the vocabulary level, even to the structures. And they are able to use their own expertise to see the weaknesses of student writing, not gleefully, but in relief that they can do that, and perhaps they can even do it better. As so many of them said, the essays in *New Voices* gave them hope. "What I like best about reading works by students like myself are the topics and also just knowing that these students took the same classes we are now taking, and it shows how the classes have definitely improved their writing skills" (Mayra). "I like the idea that these students are just like me and reading such great works by them makes me feel a little more confident that I am also able to master great writing of my own. I like the topics in *New Voices*, the positions the students take, especially that they are able to support their positions" (Billey). "What I like best is I can relate to them, I hear my own voice, and it gives me hope as a writer" (Edwin). One anonymous student responded, "I like the fact that others felt and struggled like I did and I get strength from that. Farid agrees: "To think that I could write like them in the future makes me pleased." And Shannon sums up this hopeful attitude: "Student essays make me feel like I have a good chance of being a good writer."

In criticizing the traditional reader, students had a great deal to say about the differences between professional writing and student writing. Antonia says, "I really like the voices I hear. If the author is interesting, then I love it even more! When they explain stories and real life situations it makes me want to read even more. I like it a lot better to read essays by students because you feel connected to the reader. Sometimes I put myself in their shoes." And Billey responds again, "for some reason, knowing that I am reading a piece by some professional writer intimidates me, and knowing that I am reading something from a student like myself puts me at ease no matter how complex the other students' work can get." Anne agrees: "Professional writers write about topics that I don't care about, in a language foreign to me." Jain says, "I like reading works by students because I feel as though I can relate to their writing more than to the professional. It helps to see their mistakes so I can fix my own that are similar." And Reynaldo is quite stern

with professional writers: "They simply want to show that they can write; they are wordy while students get to the point." Jazzmin poignantly voices the complaint of so many students who have been talked at for so much of their lives: "The essays by students are easier to connect with and they feel more personal. It is like having a conversation with a new friend. You don't know much about them, but you get to see their point of view on different things. Reading essays by professional writers is like talking to a stranger at the bus stop who is much older than you. You feel that they are just telling you everything THEY know."

Of course, we know that faculty have been using sample student papers in the classroom for many years as a modeling strategy that familiarizes students with the genre of the academic essay. However, a publication that institutionalizes and formalizes what we know to be good teaching practice is a significant departure from the traditional reader. Students in our program are motivated to prepare manuscripts for submission to the collection. Writing for publication motivates them to revise, which in turn encourages them to seek help from their writing groups and the writing center. The writing instruction they receive from their groups and the tutors in the writing center demonstrate concretely the importance both of collaboration and of writing for an audience.

Because we have made *New Voices* a required text for our courses, it benefits two different student populations: students whose works are published and those students who read the published works of their peers. We design assignments so that our students' textual performances allow them to view themselves as readers and writers. (Bartholomae and Petrosky 8), and to show them the rich possibilities of writing that can be meaningful for themselves and for others (Rose 112).

New Voices allows our students to see concretely that they are readers and writers. The students are repositioning themselves not merely as consumers of knowledge, but as producers of it. I use Lu's term here purposefully (31). Basic writing instruction has historically been concerned about teaching correctness in syntax, spelling, and punctuation (Lu 55). In contrast, our students learn the importance of these traditional composition subjects in the context of revising and editing a text that they are preparing for publication. The focus of basic writing in the context of submitting for publication is on the argument, the idea, and the story of the writer. Writers are empowered to struggle with their verbal weaknesses within the context of writing to an audience. Furthermore, this collection gives our published writers a wider audience, a sense that what they have to say is a continuation of a conversation. They see themselves as writers, and as university students who have become confident as members of an academic community. Our student writers have struggled to reach this point. In his portfolio reflective letter, Urias asks his instructor: "Is there a formula which exists to help me?" And he at last acknowledges that there is none. Instead he writes that he has gained "valuable tools," "confidence" and "experience. Another writer in her cover letter understands that writing is still difficult: "Sometimes I know exactly what I want to say, but I don't know what words to use. It happens so often that one has to explain a feeling that is ineffable in reality." Marianna in her reflective letter acknowledges the power of writing that is worked on and carefully prepared: "I had to work diligently to find adequate research that helped color my essay with the importance of yoga. I am very into health awareness, and I wanted to make others aware that yoga will help boost their endurance, ease their minds, and purify their spirits. Like being in an ensemble cast, I found the perseverance and encouragement of my peers and my professor helped me become a better writer."

These writers are now contributing to the academy. Their writing becomes the text for the students placed in basic writing classes the following academic year. This second group, basic writers using *New Voices* as a text, tells us they learn more clearly about writing by reading what other student writers have to say. These student voices speak to them in ways professional writers do not. These students tell us they learn when they read about topics they are interested in themselves. They understand the discourse level, close to their own, that more easily enables them to internalize what a shaped piece of writing looks like. Not put off by the mature style of a professional writer or by the discourse of the academy, they can more easily see the form good writing takes, even in the writing of those who are struggling beginners like themselves. They can identify the qualities of good writing exhibited in the student writing, and they are also less hesitant to make suggestions or point out places where there might be weaknesses in that writing.

Who Owns Writing: Faculty Development

Of course, as we came to understand that portfolio evaluation not only benefited the students but also served as a powerful faculty development process, *New Voices* became influential in unexpected ways. At our annual Reading Romp, the faculty come together as an editorial board to select the essays we will publish. The process is simple. The editor prepares for the meeting by organizing the student submissions into categories: "Emerging Voices" is devoted to the portfolio reflective letters; "Telling Our Stories" contains the student narrative essays; "Responding to Texts" showcases the essays in which students have analyzed or otherwise responded to other writers' texts; "Speaking Our Minds" highlights their persuasive writing; "Introducing Our New Voices" presents brief student autobiographies. Each entry has an evaluation form stapled to it, and a place for two readers to evaluate it using a score of 6 to 1, from "Should be Published" to "Not Suitable for Publication." Those entries scoring the highest are then read aloud in small groups. In this read-around, the students' voices emerge; they engage us, prompting laughter or a catching of breath at some unexpected phrase or insight. As teachers, the faculty know they will be using *New Voices* in class. During the selection procedure, faculty advocate for particular pieces they want to see published. They identify which entries they would like to use in building assignments. By exploring new genres, or new ways to extend the genres of the personal narrative, the research paper, and the argument, faculty begin to pair papers that might work together as a unit in class on a common topic in a particular genre. Finally, about thirty pieces of student writing are selected for publication.

In selecting student texts, we try to balance the number in each of the chapter headings. The latest issue, for example, contains four reflective letters in "Emerging Voices: Portfolio Letters"; eight essays in "Telling Our Stories"; eleven essays in "Responding to Texts" (six from Developmental Reading and five from Developmental Writing); and eight essays in "Speaking Our Minds." Most essays are three to four pages long and cover a wide variety of topics.

In their narratives, the students have written about the shock of discovering the differences in grading practices between high school and the university, what it means to be placed in a basic writing class, living in the 'hood, their first crush, coming to America, abuse, family ties, loneliness.

They respond to various kinds of texts, from short novels and memoirs to arguments and articles in the contemporary media. Recent publications demonstrate their rhetorical understanding of such texts as *The Things They Carried* by Tim O'Brien; *Bless Me, Ultima*, by Rodolfo Anaya; *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress* by Dai Sijie; Orson Scott Card's *Ender's Shadow*; Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*; Jon Krakauer's *Into the Wild*. One writer thoughtfully reflects on herself and Malcolm X, seeing similarities in how and why they both learned to read.

Their arguments concern important questions about war, patriotism, the separation of church and state, the influence of

the media, violence. They are interested in writing about a variety of issues, those close to their own world and events that affect them in the larger one.

Each chapter is marked at the beginning with a full-page student drawing and the name of the chapter. Students submit original drawings for the cover itself and for the chapter headings. We also include photo-collages of student writers, faculty, and administrators in various activities associated with the program. Faculty members who act as the editorial board are listed on the title page; individual faculty members are acknowledged along with the student author of each published essay.

In response to Doug Hesse's question, we can say that we teachers of basic writing are also the stewards of writing and writers in this action of selecting, discussing, and publishing student writing. The process of selecting the thirty or so pieces of student writing to publish enables the faculty to interact with the program in profound ways because it allows them to perceive connections between student writing and learning, between learning and their own writing pedagogy. When faculty discuss a piece of student writing, they also discuss the assignment or prompt which elicited the student response. They talk about various units that can be built around such topics. In our developmental faculty meetings when best practices are shared, frequently a faculty member acknowledges that a particularly good idea sprang from the discussions during the essay selection at the Reading Romp. New texts are suggested, one text prompting faculty to suggest others. Thus, *New Voices* keeps the program fresh, lively, dynamic, and collaborative.

At this year's Reading Romp, the faculty discussed the possibility of having students participate in this selection process. We have seen how we have developed as teachers and readers and assignment designers in this process. And as good stewards we want to encourage our students to develop in new ways as well. We look forward to designing the procedures through which students placed in basic writing classes will participate in an initial selection, or perhaps have their own section of student favorites in *New Voices*.

Who Owns Writing: The "Contact Zone"

Bartholomae and Pratt's term "contact zone" can connote a hostile place where competing interests collide (8, 34). And there are many places on college campuses where this happens. The "contact zone" we are talking about, however, is a place where various members of the campus community come together to recognize outstanding achievement and to make contact with each other. To encourage student submission to *New Voices*, and to acknowledge achievement by students and their writing faculty, prizes are awarded to those students whose submissions are judged to be the best in their categories. As the journal has evolved, we ask a jury of three to select prize-winners. The jury panel for *New Voices* consists of one faculty member of the Developmental Writing Program, one other faculty member or administrator from across the campus, and an area community college instructor. The prize money is donated by our campus bookstore, and we acknowledge this generosity in the publication.

For three years, we published the journal ourselves, scraping together money from mini-grants and the generosity of our administration. Larger university grants of \$3000 to \$5000 helped to upgrade the journal by paying for editorial and technical expenses. These Judge Julian Beck Grants are given by the California State University Northridge Corporation to fund special projects on campus, especially those projects which most directly impact teaching and learning. Because *New Voices* is now a required text in our program, students purchase the journal from the bookstore. The university uses some of the royalties from publication to offset the expenses. The publisher pays for expenses of the awards ceremony which include copies of the journal to be awarded to those students who are published in *New Voices*. The publisher also provides us with extra copies to be distributed to university officials, such as the president, the provost, the dean of humanities, and others.

New Voices has become known across the university. One administrator told us that when she read *New Voices*, she formed a clearer picture of the demographic material she had been reading in reports and studies: "Summertime reading took on a new dimension for me this year with your dynamic publication, *New Voices*. Not only did the publication demonstrate proficiency in writing by students enrolled in the Developmental Writing Program, it also provided intense insights into the personal lives of those published here." The associate vice president for undergraduate programs and the dean of humanities keep copies in their offices to showcase university programs. The student affairs office has used *New Voices* at fall student orientation, our outreach has used it as a recruiting tool, and our dean has used it in connection with programs in our local high schools. The writing center director always requests copies to use in the preparation of tutors.

New Voices is the site where students, faculty, the university and community meet. It is the site where the "competing members" come together to celebrate student achievement, to honor faculty who have taught the students, and to acknowledge the resources provided by various segments of the university and the community. In the latest accreditation report from the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC), the evaluators specifically commended the English Department for *New Voices*. At our latest awards ceremony, attended by students, parents, faculty, and administrators, our university president, Dr. Jolene Koester, said that she was impressed to see a program make something positive out of what is so often a negative experience. In her address to the student writers and their families, she thanked them for contributing to the university community with their stories, and their willingness to share their writing with others.

As the editorial board of *New Voices*, we see our students as part of this community, to be counted among those whose role is to be stewards of writing—stewards in the sense that we take care of it, nourish it, and pass it on. Basic writers come to us from high schools where they have been taught an English curriculum centered on American and British literature. While the new state standards in California list many curriculum concerns, rhetorical reading and writing are not skills of all of our incoming students. *New Voices* illustrates for both our students and secondary-school faculty the kind of writing expected of our in-coming writers. Members of our faculty working with high school teachers and high school peer tutors use *New Voices* to illustrate the kind of writing we expect of our college writers. Currently the RIAP (the Reading Institute) part of the Early Assessment Program (EAP) at the California State University system uses *New Voices* in working with high school teachers who come to our campus for rhetorical reading workshops. In these ways, *New Voices* connects high schools and the university using student stories and student writing to forge the link.

New Voices Interactive (NVI)

New Voices has evolved. It has entered the electronic era. The 2004 document from NCTE entitled "NCTE Beliefs

about the Teaching of Writing" notes that "Writing instruction must accommodate the explosion in technology from the world around us" (9). Students in our program are expected to know how to use electronic media, to navigate the web and web-based data-bases, to use email for communication with each other and with faculty members. Most faculty members have web sites for their classes, posting syllabi and class discussion sites. Inspired by a computer presentation by a community college colleague, the faculty decided to incorporate more computer work and make it possible for students to access student writing independently. The result is *New Voices Interactive* (NVI). With the help of another Beck Grant, six members of the developmental writing faculty were paid stipends to design an interactive web site for students to use. The faculty consultants analyzed student writing for the qualities and components that are part of the guidelines and the rubric. Each student essay highlights the rhetorical and grammatical strengths of developmental writing. The user can interact with the text by choosing an element from the side bar on the site such as *thesis, transition, or active voice* and that particular element will be highlighted within the essay. Each piece is accompanied by writing tasks that allow students and instructors to investigate rhetorical, structural, and grammatical elements. Links are also embedded directing student users to pop-up explanations and interactive exercises.

Conclusions

New Voices integrates the components of our Developmental Writing Program. *New Voices* serves our students by giving to some a venue for publishing and giving to others useful student models. This collection of student essays is part of the process which helps our program adapt to our students' needs. In the publication we recognize their good writing, and use it to demonstrate concretely our student learning objectives and our program standards. *New Voices* forges links within the university and with the high schools that send their students to us by demonstrating the kinds of rhetorical and verbal standards we expect of beginning university students. *New Voices* serves our faculty, giving them a chance to showcase their students' work and to share with each other timely and pedagogically sound reading and writing assignments. Because of *New Voices*, the university sees its basic writers as new members who have struggled and succeeded in making their voices heard. In the contact zone where students bring their families and friends to the awards ceremony, the university acknowledges the sacrifices parents have made to make a college education possible for their children. The families see the commitment of the university in providing the tools all scholars need to succeed: critical reading and writing. The process involved in publishing *New Voices* develops pedagogical practices to help the basic writers prepare their final portfolio and strengthens the program in its entirety. It answers the question: we all own writing. *New Voices* is the enduring record of student writing, of the standards of our program, and of the university's commitment to all of its students.

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