Encouraging Student Voices: Toward a Voice-Based and Antiracist Culture from the MA Program to Basic Writing

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ABSTRACT: The authors discuss their process of actively working to generate interest among graduate students and faculty to change approaches to Basic Writing pedagogy, emphasizing personal writing and antiracist pedagogies at College of Staten Island CUNY, a large public university. The authors argue that master's level coursework and faculty professional development can forward an agenda that values multilingual writers and their voices through code-meshing. In particular, we focus on MA student teachers' composition theory backgrounds and how they express them in Writing Program professional development workshops and further into the classroom. The lead writer, an alumna of the CSI MA program in English, discusses the content of her thesis—focusing on code-meshing and voice development—and how she showcased this work as a teaching assistant for our grad program, further serving as a voice and advocate for Writing Studies on campus.

KEYWORDS: antiracist pedagogies; graduate student mentorship; MA teacher training; responding to student writing; voice; Writing Program Administration

Writing Studies and the Golden Calf (Rosanne)

One of the dominant narratives of literacy education is student success—demonstrated through data that shows speedy advancement through courses, high graduation rates, and indexes of social mobility post-graduation. At least at our institution in the City University of New York (CUNY) system, we are not immune to such discourses because they are built into our ethos and mission. In fact, these narratives make their way into our

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advertising, our administrative agendas, and our assessments of our colleges and programs. Underlying this desire for student success, particularly when we focus on basic writing education, are harmful assumptions about language and its use. For example, professors may see code-switching as a way forward in successfully transitioning students from working class and minoritized backgrounds into the academic community and its current discourses; code-switching's advocates say that we should value students' home and school languages, thus teaching them language awareness and flexibility. Ultimately, in this view, students are taught to rhetorically choose Standard American English (SAE) for school and professional contexts (Wheeler and Swords).

Though there has been a push to abandon code-switching ideologies in the larger academic field of Rhetoric and Composition studies—as evidenced by the recent keynote speeches at CCCCs and in other scholarship (Baker-Bell; Inoue; Smitherman; Young)—there is still a lag from theory to practice, in how our Writing Programs and English Departments are actually run. This leads many PhDs and specialists in Rhetoric and Composition to mistakenly believe writing programs are adapting to become more antiracist when they are not.

When I started working at College of Staten Island (CSI) CUNY, in 2015, I realized that the Writing Program there—though process-based in its approach to teaching writing—had not been active in thinking about antiracist approaches to literacy. This does not mean there weren't individual instructors doing antiracist work, it just means it wasn't part of official programmatic messaging, curriculum, or professional development. Furthermore, CSI also had trouble maintaining tenure and tenure-track rhetoric and composition scholars for almost two decades, cycling through several hires. The CSI Writing Program's insular, conservative culture and workaday conditions (a high number of adjunct to full-time ratio, with the WPA managing 100 adjuncts every semester) most certainly played a role in the high turnover.

Though part of the CUNY system, CSI—in the middle of the island, in the most conservative borough of New York City—is hard to reach, both geographically and psychologically. As a result, CSI has a very insular culture and many of our administrative staff and adjuncts are Staten Islanders who would identify as working-class Whites from ethnic enclaves. However, this is less true of our students, who have become a more diverse population as the college continues to attract Brooklynites who can now take a limited stop bus to the school. Our working-class White adjunct faculty and administrative staff understand education as a hustle, playing to get ahead—hard

work will lead to a middle-class kind of lifestyle and success. Standards are standards; rules are rules. Keep your head down, don't get too invested, and get through it, like a shot at the doctor's office. Ira Shor discusses the dominant bootstraps ideology, of the insulation and slowness to change at CSI in his many monographs. The wall of "the status quo," he writes, is high and well-fortified; it ". . . has an inertial strength carrying along many people who actually resent the system, especially in times of diminished dreams and rising insecurity," yet at the same time, people keep buying into the hustle because it is "safer and simpler to nest in traditional methods than to risk official punishment and professional isolation by experimenting for critical change" (*When Students* 52). This "hustle" mentality ultimately leads to writing pedagogies and assessment methods that are damaging to minoritized and working-class students in first-year writing, as the status quo of correctness in writing is maintained and a bias is created against those who are not fluent in Standard American English (SAE).

CSI is not an outlier. For varying reasons, traditional approaches to teaching writing are normal operating procedure in many writing programs in this country. Full-time faculty with institutional and programmatic agency, then, have to follow through on a process of re-organizing the teaching of writing; this means they have to fully dismantle the foundations of bootstraps and merit-based success discourses. WPAs and others should replace these with a shift to expressive discourses that value student agency in language choice and an appreciation of students' experiences; our curriculums and pedagogical practices, then, should ideally engage students' "ethnic rhetorics, multilingualism, and culturally-plural literacies" (Kynard *Writing While Black* 6). This message becomes even more important when a university serves a majority of students who identify as minoritized and working class, like CSI CUNY.

In conversations between the coauthors, we agree that writing education isn't about "saving" poor, minoritized kids from their under-prepared educational and literacy backgrounds or pulling them away from their rich cultural and / or linguistic heritages (Baker-Bell 16); education isn't a promise of advancement that we can hold out, like a golden calf. Many in Rhetoric and Composition, including the authors of this article, are done believing in the myth of student success, in "the myth that the same language (White Mainstream English) and language education that have been used to oppress Black [and other minoritized] students can empower them" (Baker-Bell 34).

I'm indebted to the voices of Young, of Smitherman, of Baker-Bell, and many other scholars because this work helped me see how code-switching

"contradicts our best efforts and hopes for our students" (Young 51). A younger me, a naiver me, needed to read these texts and needed to imagine education differently, to keep returning to my White, female body and to interrogate the role it has played historically in education, to view myself as a historical subject, but also as a person who has agency, who can make choices, who doesn't have to reproduce the past. In thinking about my placement as an educator in the CUNY system, and College of Staten Island in particular, I can't help but feel the historical context of what we are doing in composition classrooms in the present and for the future. To talk about Basic Writing is always to encounter the history of CUNY, to understand its mission to educate New York's working class and its commitment to students of color. To extrapolate to the larger field, then, the endpoint of first-year writing (FYW) should be a pedagogical focus on student experience and voice as it is the "gain" we have to offer as writing educators; because, if we forward this goal, we can set the stage for real change in our society and we can stop worshipping the false idols of success discourses set before us due to capitalist, racist, and patriarchal norms.

As coauthors, Liz and I wish to explore the following questions throughout our article: How do we center student voice and experience in writing? How do we persuade writing instructors, particularly part-time adjuncts whose backgrounds are not in linguistic and rhetorical studies, that the tenets of code-switching uphold a racist hierarchy; that code-meshing (or incorporating multiple languages, the practice we will center throughout this discussion) can foster the development of student voices and more equitable classroom spaces? How do we administer writing programs with justice-oriented approaches to language pedagogy and practice?

What we are getting at here is an ideological shift in our thinking about the meaning of composition and education more broadly—at CSI CUNY, but also at other institutions across the country still largely adhering to traditional instruction and assessment. One dominant ideology, or counterclaim, is to defend the practice of a "liberal education" in which code-switching is thus cast as a tool of salvation, because it is seen as a way to economically better the lives of students (often working class, but not always) who speak multiple languages and dialects so that they can pass in "professional" or "academic" settings if they speak and write in SAE. As Vershawn Young argues, code-switching upholds "segregationist, racist logics" (Young 51)—in other words, the warrants (or minor premise) of this ideology is to continue the idea that other languages don't have the same value as SAE, that a whole lot of people don't have the same value as White people.

Advocates for code-switching may say that education is about securing paths to advancement for speakers of undervalued Englishes, upholding professional standards, and fostering ease of communication, and/or promoting language universality. This argument champions liberal education and SAE as a tool for class advancement, and many adjuncts in our CSI Writing Program would agree with this powerful logic. Donald Lazere's recent arguments in *College Composition and Communication* draw upon the same framework of understanding literacy education as a tool for class advancement. Using Audre Lorde as a case study, Lazere argues that Lorde used her "liberal education," and by extension standardized English, to advance in academia ("Response to Paula Mathieu and William H. Thelin"). In Lazere, I hear the implication that Lorde's passing somehow undermined the radical messages in her work, such as the idea that the master's tools will not tear down the master's house. In effect, Lazere claims that current economically "disenfranchised" students are being double-marginalized because they are now being discouraged from attaining a "liberal education" with SAE at its center, a circumstance framed as a "privilege" that will enable them to enter "critical discourse" and middle-class habitus (474).

First of all, education isn't a privilege, it's a right, and it should be free to all people who seek it; the difference of privilege and right is important because the former situates education as a vehicle for elitism and the latter situates education as a vehicle for democratic social change. Also, elite institutions don't hold a monopoly on quality of educational experience, and readers should remember that Lorde worked at CUNY for the SEEK program at City College (See Lorde). Most importantly, Liz and I see this point of view as a failure of imagination of what education can be. As if access to some sort of classical ideal (reading of "canonical texts") and a standard set of language practices makes a person able to enter the public sphere armed with force and reason. It doesn't. Was Lorde a brilliant poet and author only due to her elite, liberal education? I think not. Or, at least I think that assertion is reductive. Didn't Lorde also get a kind of education on New York's subways, from her Caribbean mother, from her years of marching with women in the streets? And, finally, does Lorde only write or speak in SAE? No. Not at all. Lorde code-meshes in her various books and poetry.

If we can agree that the force of writing is intimately connected to the development of voice, of a way of being and a style in the text, then, in a way, we have to imagine too that voices can work to reflect life experience, can house contradictions, can contain multiple ways of expression, and can draw upon many languages. How limiting it is to only imagine academic

discourse as the province of elite learning and SAE, as if we were planting a tree seedling into a clay pot.

This is a story of our full-time Writing Program faculty's efforts at CSI CUNY to create a voice-based and antiracist culture around and for writing and the teaching of writing. This is not to say that our department has arrived at this place—we haven't—we have a long journey to get there, just like other writing programs, our professional organizations, and academia on the whole. In this article, we are trying to name the convergence of circumstances and practices that undergird an ideological shift toward these goals for composition. Liz and I believe that master's level coursework and faculty professional development can forward an agenda that values multilingual writers and their voices through code-meshing. In order to facilitate these changes, our CSI Writing Program has added more opportunities for engagement with critical theory, both for our MA students and our adjunct faculty, which make up the majority of our composition program. For example: (1) We changed our MA program through adding a thesis requirement, with students completing theses in subjects in Rhetoric and Composition (Spring 2017); (2) We created an opportunity for MA students to teach in our Writing Program (Fall 2017); (3) We offered consistent opportunities for professional development for graduate students and adjunct faculty in the Writing Program (Fall 2017).

We specifically focus on how developing MA student teachers' knowledge in composition theory translates into this department cultural change that emphasizes personal writing and antiracist pedagogies. We co-wrote this article so that Liz's experience of writing her thesis, and how she showcased her writing as a TA for a class in our graduate program, could serve as a critical case study for this work. She details her process of writing her thesis, which focused on code-meshing and personal experience; our work together as mentor and mentee; the challenges she faced in writing; and the ways she understood how she was composing her own voice on the page. Liz's thesis journey, which beautifully shows the power of personal narrative and also represents that voice of students who are continually silenced by supremacist cultures of writing and its administrations, further illustrates the need to begin changing the culture of higher education now to a full embrace of code-meshing ideologies.

The CSI MA Program: The Thesis Requirement, New MA Instructors, and A Commitment to a Voice-Based and Antiracist Writing Culture (Rosanne)

The first step in encouraging student voices in a writing program—particularly focusing on minoritized students' experiences—should begin in coursework, professional development, and training for current and future writing teachers. When I accepted my job at CSI CUNY in Fall 2015, I knew I would be teaching in the MA program and also assisting the Writing Program with adjunct professional development. As I grew into my position and role in the department, and also as I later stepped into the role of directing the MA Program, I began to see how we can make critical changes and interventions in the Writing Program via training MA students to be instructors. This population, in general, is more open to institutional critique and change, perhaps because they have experienced first-hand the soul-sucking nature of a standards-based, depersonalized system and education—as Liz will describe in her narrative. This move helped in stabilizing the adjunct pool, but also afforded us the ability to hire people with some background in Rhetoric and Composition.

Our MA in English Program at CSI consists mostly of students who transition from our undergraduate program; many of them have a desire to work or are already working in high schools, or they want to work in higher education as writing instructors or in advising capacities. Very few of our students decide to go on to pursue PhDs. In the program, students can choose to concentrate on Literature or Rhetoric and Composition.

Because we do not have a concentration or minor in Rhetoric and Composition studies on the undergraduate level, many of our MA students are encountering critical theory about literacy and its acquisition for the first time. Successful English students at CSI—those who make it to an MA program—can sometimes view Basic Writers through a deficit stance due to their lack of engagement with theory. Like some of the professors they have encountered at CSI, they may subscribe to intensive grammar instruction and to notions of the superiority of SAE—even if they themselves have suffered through this type of corrective instruction. In practice, they may believe in an ideology of code-switching, without knowing the technical term. As Marcia Buell explains, because of this potential bias, instructors who train and work with pre-service teachers should "design MA courses which promote a *theorized pedagogy* that explores how history and social or institutional contexts drive pedagogical approaches. . . . [and] question why

and how they should be applied to particular contexts in order to best serve basic writers" (93). Furthermore, the reasoning behind reading and discussing content about basic writers and their right to their own language use can also be, as Susan Naomi Bernstein explains, "[to] cultivate compassion for the life circumstances and positionality of [BW] students" (11).

Because of important curricular and administrative changes made in 2017, our MA students can both teach for the CSI Writing Program and pursue writing a thesis in Rhetoric and Composition and often become important voices for Rhetoric and Composition among their peers and with our adjunct faculty. MA students in Rhetoric and Composition now complete a 28-page thesis on topics in our field; the thesis need not be original research, but should "explore a topic in a way that significantly adds to conversations among scholars in the field" (Rubric).

Due to the MA students' new roles, it is very important to design our MA classes to lead to more critical, thoughtful, and intentional teaching. In this vein, I've stripped away the need to cover some sort of "master narrative" of the field of Rhetoric and Composition and terms associated with our disciplinary movements, like "expressivism," "social turn," and "post-process." Rather, I focus my 15-week course on larger themed ideas, like "Developing Student Voice and Agency" or "Ethical Assessment and Feedback Practices." In essence, rather than weighing the class down in field-specific jargon, I've foregrounded the subtopics in the field most applicable to the populations that my students will most likely teach or advise: NYC public school and CUNY students, primarily minoritized and working-class students.

Therefore, I introduce students to the work of critical pedagogy, alternative assessment practices, and code-meshing because I want them to think about education as a place where White supremacy lives and has to be rooted out. Because my classes have a majority of White students and educators, my goal is to have them face their privilege, to learn the emotion of being uncomfortable, and to harness the critical skills of listening, reflection, and action to change the system. This translates to about half the class weeks (7) being dedicated to readings and themes that center around Basic Writing, such as its history at CUNY, writing assessment and feedback, voice development, code-meshing, and ESL pedagogies. Students are assigned several projects throughout the semester that ask them to reflect on the readings and apply them in pedagogy. Some of the assignments are practical in nature, such as creating a writing assignment or unit based on a weekly reading theme and leading class discussion / creating discussion questions for the class. Other assignments, such as composing short reading responses on our discussion,

writing a teaching philosophy, and doing an annotated bibliography with independent research, further aid students in writing a research paper on the topic of their choice. Ideally, students who concentrate in Rhetoric and Composition can begin laying the groundwork for specialization in the field, and can work with me (or another Rhet/Comp affiliated faculty member) as a mentor for their thesis projects. Liz, as a former student, started developing her thesis ideas when she took the Teaching of Writing course with me. All of these activities are planned out with the hope that the MA student can also translate this knowledge to classroom practice, especially if they continue to teach with us in the CSI Writing Program.

This article doesn't have the space or focus to review all readings that are relevant to developing a political orientation toward literacy education in the assistance of helping future teachers better serve critical student populations (Gray-Rosendale). I will, however, pause to discuss three readings and some critical questions we explored together. For example, students in my class grappled with Jackie Jones Royster's idea of "home-training," of outsiders entering African American communities to comment on the literacy practices of residents and what it means to be interpellated by a normative gaze, as she describes these in "When the First Voice You Hear Is Not Your Own" (32). I specifically asked students to think about the metaphor of the contact zone, or Royster's concept of "cross-boundary exchange" (30), in the case of this article, among different race backgrounds. I wrote to the class:

> Royster puts forward several ideas as to how these exchanges could go better; one of these ideas is "home-training" (32). What does "home-training" mean, and how does she develop this idea throughout the piece? How can we apply the concept of "home-training" to our work in the classroom with diverse populations?

Another week, students consider how traditional writing assessment is a practice that reifies racial hierarchies and biases, and how we can work to change our practices through alternative approaches such as contract grading. They read Asao B. Inoue's proposal for contracts in "How I Came to Labor-Based Contracts" from his book, *Labor-Based Grading Contracts: Building Equity and Inclusion in the Compassionate Writing Classroom*. Inoue argues for shifting writing assessment based on labor, not based on quality, because of these biases (Inoue 60). We specifically focus on Inoue's Marxist critique of writing standards and why we must question them. We specifically look to Inoue's own question at the end of the chapter: "What is so wrong with

'non-judgmental, unpunitive, encouraging' classroom assessment ecologies? Who says that judgmental, punitive, and discouraging assessment ecologies work better?" (72). We discuss the concerns about and barriers to practicing a contract-based grading system (particularly in the high schools), and we think about alternative assessment forms that can serve as a corrective to the problem of racial and linguistic bias.

Further, we discuss Black linguistic racism and how this is perpetuated in schools through particular pedagogical approaches, such as code-switching and contrastive analysis via April Baker-Bell's chapter of her book *Linguistic Justice*, "What's Anti-Blackness Got to Do with It?" We specifically focus on the section that discusses the internal impact these biases have on school children, where Baker-Bell charges that eradicating Black language via strategies like code-switching erases "Black people's ways of knowing, interpreting, surviving, being, and resisting in the world" (25). We talk about how, as literacy educators, we can be change-agents and activist in promoting antiracist pedagogies in our schools. I specifically have them discuss the ten framing ideas for "Antiracist Black Language Education and Pedagogy" (Baker-Bell 35), and offer potential practical strategies and approaches that value these ideas for the classroom.

The above readings, along with others that I include in their coursework, invite MA students to think differently about literacy education; they ask us to reflect on the ways that identity, language use and writing, and social context are inexplicably linked. Some students can begin to question received biases they may hold around literacy and its acquisition. Others, alternatively, can encounter—if they are ESL or dialect speakers—a recognition that the languages they speak are valuable and a part of their academic voice. Readers are exposed to ideas that may help them confront some of the inequalities that "business as usual" (i.e. rigor, grit, traditional grading, and other inherited ideas) in the writing classroom may perpetuate because of the common belief in the superiority of SAE. My hope, too, is that these readings act as a form of persuasion that, through their arguments of embracing voice-based pedagogies, such as code-meshing, readers will see the real value of student languages / dialects and life perspectives. Additionally, many students who concentrate in Rhetoric and Composition, like Liz, decide to write their thesis on one or more of these sub-topics, delving further into the scholarly literature and becoming even more conversant with the field.

Unlike some of their adjunct peers who may have little to no experience with composition theory, as they come from backgrounds usually in creative writing or literature, our CSI MA students bring a familiarity with concepts

like code-meshing. Their presence changes the dynamic of the conversations we now have in professional development workshops.

Professional Development Before and After: Bringing in Composition Theory Knowledges (Rosanne)

The important part of our mission at CUNY, the part Writing Programs and their administrators and faculty should hold onto, is to work to raise class and race consciousness and to overthrow social hierarchies (enforced through practices like code-switching) that perpetuate White supremacy. Liz and I believe that to teach in the CUNY system—and to do it with some sense of ethics—is to invest time in knowing and practicing current theories in the field of Rhetoric and Composition that perpetuate the spirit of the 1974 CCCC "Statement of Students' Right to Their Own Language." This landmark resolution, which has gone through several revisions, basically affirms people's rights to their own language in speech and writing, particularly in the context of schooling. In other words, it places educators as activists for a future where all languages can be leveraged for powerful rhetorical discourse and meanings. Educators who stand by the tenets of the resolution, then, believe students should not be taught to eradicate or switch their languages in formal speaking and writing settings in order to pass.

Yet, in our Writing Program at CSI, our sections (including developmental and ESL) are largely staffed by adjunct faculty—we employ around 100 adjuncts a semester, some of whom are also graduate students. The majority of our faculty are White and also do not have a background in Rhetoric and Composition; as such, some hold deficit stances toward students and believe in success myths, for example, focusing on the superiority of SAE in writing instruction, enforcing code-switching, and emphasizing the need to know SAE to advance in life. By contrast, Basic Writing is turning more toward a future with equity and access as a priority; for example, in the 2018 Special Issue of *JBW*, guest edited by Laura Gray-Rosendale, Marcia Buell and Barbara Gleason reiterate this importance in training graduate student teachers, advocating for the creation of teaching communities that bolster knowledge of composition theory and challenges deficit stances.

Culture and ideological changes in a Writing Program are often slow, and College of Staten Island CUNY still has a long way to go to improve its performance when it comes to antiracist work. Our Black and Brown students fail composition at much higher rates than their White counterparts, just as they do at other universities in the country.[1] We are in a broken system.

The CSI Writing Program—like many Writing Programs across the country—can only improve so much in a system of higher education that sustains such unfair hiring practices and such great income inequalities between full-time and part-time faculty. In some instances, we are able to pay adjuncts for their professional development time—when their efforts are connected to grant monies the department has earned or that our administration has given us. But a lot of our Writing Program workshops and reading groups are voluntary, and this can limit people's availability and incentive to participate.

Our Writing Program full-time faculty (which includes eight members: three tenure line professors; two PhDs in Rhet/Comp, one in Linguistics among them) has been working to expose our part-time faculty (close to 100 adjuncts) to the field of Rhetoric and Composition through our reading groups, workshops, and curriculum discussions while including composition theory. In these meetings, we now have a mixed audience of CUNY Graduate Center WAC PhD students, current and former CSI MA students with some familiarity of the field, and our other Writing Program adjuncts, with creative writing and literature backgrounds. We offer a professional development workshop in Writing Studies monthly, and additionally host a composition theory reading group every fall (two readings in the semester).

Prior to 2017, we focused professional development events solely on practice, bringing forward topics that are relevant to day to day classroom issues, such as commenting on student writing, designing writing assignments, and using Blackboard to facilitate discussions. These workshops assisted Writing Program adjuncts, but they didn't quite help them to reflect on their philosophy of writing, their purpose for educating students, and their reasonings behind their classroom practices. They also didn't introduce a critical element into the discussions that may have led to investigating language, racial and/or class biases and critiques of SAE toward antiracist pedagogies.

Because of the changing circumstances of the MA program, we started the composition theory readings groups in Fall 2017 to create more of a sense of a cohort among our MA student teachers and also to include adjuncts in these meetings; we have offered it every year since. The reading group takes up topics similar to those covered in my MA seminars, such as writing assessment and feedback, voice development, code-meshing, and ESL pedagogies.

Though we have read eight articles and book chapters since the start of the reading group series in 2017, I have the space here to focus on one session as an example of our work with adjunct instructors in professional

development. In Fall 2019, I along with Harry Thorne (another full-time faculty member), and CUNY WAC Fellows hosted a reading group on Asao Inoue's 2019 CCCC Keynote Address: "How Do We Language So People Stop Killing Each Other, Or What Do We Do About White Language Supremacy?"

The transcript, slides, and video of his speech were distributed to our adjunct listserv weeks in advance of the group to ensure time for careful reading and thought. Harry and I framed the invitation to the reading group by summarizing the text:

> In this address, Inoue describes how racial injustice in society is also present in the academy, particularly in the field of Writing Studies. He focuses on how White language supremacy influences the creation of academic standards and also in everyday assessment of student writing in composition classrooms. This address is an abridged version of his recent book, *Labor-Based Grading Contracts: Building Equity and Inclusion in the Compassionate Writing Classroom (2019).*

In the reading group we centered our discussion around these three questions, which were distributed to participants at the workshop:

1. What is Asao Inoue's main argument in his CCCC Chair's Address?
2. Inoue addresses 2 separate audiences—Why? How does this affect the delivery of his message?
3. Inoue states at the end of the keynote: "So I reiterate and reframe Royster's questions: *How* are you attending, exactly? What are the markers of your compassionate attending? How is your attending a practice of judgement that your students can notice? How is it a practice that recognizes their existence without overly controlling them?" How do we find the balance in the classroom between the feedback we are expected to provide and still giving students the space to express themselves in their own voice?

Through these questions, we framed the discussion around student-teacher relations and power dynamics in the classroom. We also drew attention to how Inoue challenges instructors with White identities to see their language as the center of a system that excludes others. As a follow-up to this workshop, full-time faculty met with interested instructors to discuss implementation of grading contracts; though contracts are not used by the majority of our faculty (yet), we believe that they are increasing in use throughout the Writing Program. Because we have been bringing in composition theory to allow

people to reflect and theorize their experiences in the classroom and their teaching practices, we hope that these efforts lead to more voice-focused and antiracist approaches.

These changes in our Writing Program—the newly-trained MA instructors we hired and the recent professional development workshops and reading and working groups we are hosting— are creating a community that is developing a way to talk about the teaching of writing that is professionally informed by scholarship.

This above description is not an argument for the superiority of "disciplinarity," or a belief that once we inject "disciplinary" knowledge into a writing program, the work is done. In our approach to the reading group and professional development overall, we want to use the scholarship of Rhetoric and Composition to guide instructors to reflect on their past educational and literacy experiences and the work they've been doing in the classroom. They can internalize and make sense of theory through their own lenses of identity and experience (race, class, gender, etc.), and then they can work to express that theory through their own thinking, writing, and classroom practices.

Furthermore, when we focus on voice-based work in MA classes and in instructor professional development, we are embedding a sense of importance around positionality (particularly via race and class) with the aim to persuade teachers and students that minoritized students' voices matter, and that they should be able to write in their own languages and dialects. We need to mentor instructors to hear the developing voices of their students, to be able to offer feedback that encourages their students to express their current understanding and their past experiences.

Valuing New Perspectives from the MA Program with a Focus on Language Work (Rosanne introduces Liz)

In reflecting on the ways I have known Liz over the years, first as a student in my MA Teaching of Writing course in Fall 2016; as a thesis writer in Spring 2018; as a TA in my MA Writing Across the Curriculum course in Fall 2018; and now as a coauthor of this article, I can see how our relationship has grown, and how our ideas on voice and pedagogy have also developed over time. We are trying to speak back to larger disciplinary discourses, but we are also inflecting our own experiences in this work. We are capturing what it is like to learn and teach at our school in the CUNY system. There is value in this kind of storytelling, a move "[t]o strengthen our sense of identity" by "describ[ing] how [we] were drawn to this work, how [we] pursued a

professional identity, and the kinds of bridges [we] see or have constructed . . . to basic writing" (Uehling 58). In the next section, Liz will elaborate on her story of writing her thesis—a process that helped her discover her writing voice—and how she has shared this research and writing with students as a TA for the MA Writing Across the Curriculum course, serving as an advocate for writing studies at CSI.

If we can summarize the spirit of our article it would be this: when you develop a voice, it isn't an echo; it's a shout in your own register—students are shouting to be heard, and we need to listen. Liz so eloquently demonstrates this attitude in her section of this paper.

"Oppression of Expression": The Beginnings of the MA Thesis (Liz)

I am a writer, and it is just as much a part of my identity as my ethnicity or social background. I wasn't the typical middle-class White student that speaks SAE coherently and was at the top of their class. I was a first-generation college graduate— despite being the youngest—coming from a working-class family with nine-to-five jobs, living paycheck by paycheck. I wanted to break the generational cycle and expand my mind and my passions by enrolling in grad school. When I started the English MA program at CSI back in 2016, I wanted to extend my knowledge in writing. I wanted to use the next two years perfecting my craft and to come out of the program not only a better reader but a better writer.

During my first semester, I took my first Rhetoric and Composition course, The Teaching of Writing, with Professor Carlo. Even with just an enrollment total of twelve students, that class offered more than just ways to teach writing to students. It offered an opportunity for me to dig deep within myself and come to terms with the educational issues I experienced as an undergraduate. Within my studies, I was passionate about writing yet felt like I didn't receive the kind of feedback on my writing that would help me develop my own voice. After taking Professor Carlo's class, there was no doubt in my mind that the issues discussed within that course needed to be showcased and talked about within our own Writing Program. I decided to write my MA Thesis on the lack of agency first-year college students have in developing their voices within their writing, particularly those who come from marginalized groups (i.e. social class, social background, and ESL students). I simply wanted to answer this question: *"If students' ideas in their papers are not respected or are misinterpreted by their readers, does their work*

really matter?" For the next two years, my thesis, "Oppression of Expression: The Reality of Student Writers in College Classrooms," was in the works of being the most rewarding piece I've written.

The article that first inspired me to write on this topic was Peter Elbow's "Being a Writer vs. Being an Academic: A Conflict in Goals," a piece that was published in 1995, 26 years ago. Elbow discusses the distant relationship between students and professors due to the fact that students are writing only for their professors. In view of the belief in hierarchy that professors are superior to the students, Elbow points out that "[writers] get to decide what [they] intended with [their] words; [readers] get to decide what [they] heard" (Elbow 75). As a student whose writing has been misread and misinterpreted by professors and who had been told my voice was "lost" and my ideas were not coherent, I wanted to use my voice to let other student writers realize that their ideas and their personal voices—not the one they created due to authority in academic settings—matter.

Discovering My Voice: Challenges I Faced Throughout the Writing Process (Liz)

While writing a thesis that focused on student writers and their right to use their own voices, I was learning how to use my own while writing this piece. This field and the freedom that this type of writing gave me initially left me lost and wandering with all of the things I wanted to say. In order to find my own voice and have it be heard through a committee that rarely read Rhetoric and Composition-based theses, I needed to figure out what it was about the writing process that not only worried me and silenced my voice in my college courses, but also the voice of thousands of other student writers who feel the same way.

One important aspect of the issue is that although more Black and Hispanic students are enrolling in college, they are also the two demographics with the lowest graduation rates according to information by the CUNY Office of Policy and Research, which I discuss later in the article. Throughout the thesis research process, I concluded that lower graduation rates for minoritized students were not only due to the stress of students balancing their college lives with their personal and social lives, but because some of those students don't feel like they belong in colleges and universities. When we give most of the classroom authority to professors, we lose a lot of the students' voices that should make up the majority of the classroom content.

Within my own experience in college, professors typically didn't show a genuine interest in the ideas I expressed in my own voice within my writing. In the essays I felt comfortable and confident in writing, I was still told my voice was not my own. My ideas were constantly overshadowed by grammatical and punctuation errors; the same errors that have been present in my writing due to the fact I was never properly *taught* how to fix them in my writing classrooms. In many college environments, there aren't many student-teacher relationships that offer extra support and help with these basic writing skills. Although my passion in writing never faded away, the minor mistakes on my papers reflected on my overall grades. For years, I thought I wasn't a good enough writer. I took that mindset with me while entering the English MA Program, and even while writing my thesis.

Code-Switching: The Realities Behind "Undervalued Englishes" and Multilingualism (Liz)

While exploring my own voice and also learning how to incorporate voice in student writing, I observed "code-switching" as a term that came up in a lot of my research. Vershawn Young defines the term as "the use of more than one language or language variety concurrently in conversation" (49). It's natural for people to switch their conversational talk in society; the way we speak to our friends and family isn't going to be the same way we speak to our professors in college or our supervisors in our workplaces. While there is a level of respect involved in the use of code-switching, it doesn't solve the issue of student ideas being silenced or underdeveloped because it still limits the use of their own voices in their writing.

On the surface, code-switching acknowledges that other dialects of English exist as well as multiple languages for English-language speakers. Looking deeper into code-switching within the classroom setting, though, I realized the solution to not incorporate different dialects of English and other languages in schools was another way to say that SAE is the appropriate language to use in school settings. Young concludes that "students are simultaneously required to recognize the superiority of standard English and the people associated with it" (55). In a nutshell, a writer who's lived in Brooklyn for the majority of their life should know better to not describe a cold day in the city as *"brick"* or to agree with someone's opinion with *"mad respect."* On the contrary, "code-meshing" introduces the balance between SAE and the student's own dialects or languages in an academic setting and was theorized to end the discrimination of minoritized students. While

code-meshing is a corrective that seeks to balance the informal and informative voice in academic writing, it is often still considered a "privilege" and reserved for writers high within hierarchy in the field, not for first-year composition students. The irony of making a first-year college student write an essay about their favorite memory or experience but not allowing them to use their own vocabulary, voice, and style in their writing is uncanny, to say the least.

By emphasizing the importance of using SAE in the classroom, we do not allow students to identify themselves as being multilingual. Telling students that their language is not welcomed in writing classrooms is basically saying what they identify as isn't allowed, and that's when students start to lose their voices. For example, a student's own experience with oppression regarding their race could emphasize the major themes in novels discussed in an African-American Literature course; or, a student's migration story could provide a more personal perspective on a part of history that is usually too decontextualized. Without the unique qualities of each student's cultural and racial background being present in their writing, students aren't writing to say what they want to say and are now being more oppressed in their classrooms.

Being a multilingual student who wanted to challenge the concept of code-switching, I was still being told by some of my professors that my voice was undefined in my writing. I think back now, after having this opportunity to freely tell my story in my own voice, that the voice those professors demanded was a robotic one; the one that they encouraged me to use is the same one they said was "lost" and "undefined." This is because it wasn't a voice of my own; I was speaking in a space and register that felt foreign to me. It was a challenge I had to face while writing my thesis; how do I undo the years of authority silencing my real voice, the one that always felt small in comparison to the professor's ideal?

Expressive Voices Being Present in High-Stakes Writing (Liz)

During the drafting process, I was conflicted sharing the experiences I had within my college years and the lack of my own voice in my writing. Would my thesis expose some of the defective methods that professors at CSI had regarding the teaching of writing in their courses and commenting on student papers? Would I offend the readers who believe in professorial authority and SAE? Would the committee see my colloquial language and "undervalued Englishes"—as scholar Vershawn Young describes the under-

appreciated dialects of the English language—as inappropriate language? Would taking the risk of writing how I wanted to write and saying what I wanted to say jeopardize my passing of the MA Program exit requirement?

Having been in the program during the time my MA peers were starting to teach first-year composition (ENG 111), I was cautious every time they would discuss how their students' writing was underdeveloped and insufficient for the college level. What truly concerned me about their comments was that they seemed like they gave up on trying to help their students become better writers. When I was a graduate student back in 2017, the adjunct teaching position for MA students was in its early stages and didn't require MA students to take a Rhetoric and Composition course. Because of that, many of them entered these adjunct positions believing that good writing was strictly written in the academic voice. It's important to expose prospective adjuncts to the practices of Rhetoric and Composition because the traditional practices are still present even when the scholarly community is evolving and becoming more progressive. I worried whether or not writing about something so current and active within my own university was the right thing to do. I didn't want to offend anyone or expose any of my peers for their own ideologies in pedagogy. As much as I wanted to simply say *"maybe if our MA program pushed these students to take rhet/comp courses before pursuing teaching paths, maybe then they will realize just how toxic their beliefs in teaching writing are to students."* Ultimately, I voted against it. In a sense, I felt myself censoring my own voice in a piece where I spoke about how important it was for student writers to use their voice in their writing. With some inspiration and motivation toward telling the story in the most honest way possible, I wrote the following in my thesis:

> Within my graduate program at CSI, English graduate students are granted the opportunity to teach the required first writing composition course: ENG 111. Some of my peers have expressed their frustration with their students; they've complained how difficult it is to read and understand what they are writing about because of "how awfully bad their writing is." (26)

My peers' comments on their student's writing reminded me of Tiffany Martinez, a Latin-American student whose blog post on her college paper went viral on the internet in 2016. She posted a photo of her paper with her professor's comment saying, "this is not your word," after circling the word "hence." Her story angered me; how could a professor say to one of

their minoritized students that they had no right to use a word as simple as "hence?" Her story saddened me; I understood how it felt to be defeated by a professor's words and not good enough to succeed in academia as an aspiring writer that wasn't the top English student in their classes throughout their education experience. "How many degrees do I need for someone to believe I am an academic?" was a question Martinez asked in her blog post; it was the question I kept asking myself throughout my studies as well as during the thesis writing process.

These concerns of mine were voiced in my thesis meetings with Professor Carlo; she understood the challenges I faced balancing the informative, academic voice that was present in my thesis with the voice that was unique yet not widely accepted in academia. I was comfortable enough to have these discussions about voice with Professor Carlo; her office always allowed me to have the space to speak out about my worries, my frustrations, and my ideas that were always welcome. I remember entering her office for our meetings and immediately voicing out my feelings and talking about my experiences being a distraught student in this field, and no matter how defeated in my writing process or within my coursework, I was heard. I was encouraged to talk about them in my writing; it was a piece about voice and my voice was the most important voice there was in this piece. I never felt like my voice was simply a whisper in her office.

In her office, I was reminded that my experiences were just as important as the data and research presented in my thesis. Many first-year writers feel they too have to minimize or erase their experiences in their writing. For example, Sarah Stanley, a professor at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, offers a classroom case study where one of her first-year writing students, Tejada, wrote the following sentence:

> I, (as part of a minority group) have witnessed and experienced how a single word or action on the part of those who are not categorized within the dominant culture, has contributed to the growth of stereotypical racial views as well as the choices of expression among those who are victimized by prejudice ideologies. (14)

When Tejada is asked why she decided to include that statement within parenthesis, she nervously responds that she can relate to the struggle minoritized students face in society because she identifies as one, and she felt it was important to include it in her writing. It still raises the question of why her identity is in its separate bracket within her writing, and many of her

peers notice it in that discussion. While Tejada dismisses the importance of that part of her sentence, Stanley and Tejada's classmates disagree and discuss how it's the most important part; it adds a real-world perspective to the piece that makes the evidence and research more practical than theoretical. Stanley adds Tejada's reflection to the class feedback: ". . . I think that is a big part of the sentence. . . and yet it's in parenthesis which is like I'm being kind of. . . [whispering] I'm whispering" (17). This is the reality for many students that are not considered the ideal student writer. Many students go through this process of having their identities stripped away from their writing, leaving their voices silenced completely. One of the most exciting parts about writing is students having their experiences present and ultimately sharing that information in their writing that is not just words on a page, but true to their reality. It adds an element of realness that is missing in student writing these days.

With my own thesis writing, my mission was to not only encourage other students to feel safe to take that risk in their own papers, but I personally wanted to feel safe enough to take such a different approach with my thesis. Half of that courage came from Professor Carlo listening to my voice and to the ideas I had; she made sure to remind me throughout the process that my voice was important, and what I was saying was important to put out there into the world, despite the response I may get from readers who disagree with the way I'm using my voice in academic writing.

Within the reviewing process of my thesis, I found myself having to defend my voice and my experience to one of the readers within the MA committee. At this point in the process, the first two readers passed my thesis and there was one last reader that had to pass it as well. In reviewing the comments on my thesis for one last revision, I came across a comment on one of the pages that the reader left on it. My thesis discussed how marginalized students were "restricted from expressing themselves and their individuality in their student writing" and "how professors are biased towards those of a different social background, language, and race due to stereotypes of [said] groups." The comment that was left on that page said simply the following: "This is a huge generalization and not at all consistent with my experience." The irony of having someone in authority (let alone a reader that was not a POC) argue that their experience as an educator isn't accurate to the experience POC students have in classrooms left me wondering how unaware academics in authoritative positions are to the fact that students are silently suffering within their writing courses because professors believe their traditional methods of teaching are actually efficient and

correct. As a student writing about other student writers in this academic community, I chose to keep my original words in my thesis whether or not a reader disagreed with me. My voice was my voice, and it mattered just as much as every other student that has been discouraged or afraid to speak up and write with their own voices.

The feeling was bittersweet by the time I completed my thesis at the end of the Spring 2018 semester. My thesis felt like it was more than just a 42-paged assignment to end my graduate studies; it was a representation of the person that I was in the six years I was a student at CSI. I found freedom in my voice throughout the process of completing my thesis, and it's a body of work that I will always be proud of, yet always feel will never be fully completed. To this day, we are still having conversations within the field about antiracism in our college courses and debates on the freedom of student voices in them. They are conversations that I aspire to have with prospective graduate students and current graduate students who haven't been exposed to Rhetoric and Writing Studies in their college careers, especially those who are preparing to teach our next generation of college students.

Post-Grad: Teaching, Mentorship, and Joining Ongoing Conversations (Liz)

Being a TA for Professor Carlo's class was a challenge to take on: How would I take what I learned in my MA class and from writing my thesis in Rhetoric and Composition, and initially practice what I preached? As an authoritative figure in a classroom now, how can I let students know that their ideas and opinions mattered just as much as mine and Ro's? It took trial and error to learn that there is always going to be conversations with different voices speaking about the same topics in Writing Studies. Being able to have these conversations with current and future educators in the field makes the words I wrote in my thesis that more real and practical.

In the middle of our semester, I ran a day of class to showcase my thesis to our graduate students. I opened my thesis presentation discussing the Excelsior Scholarship at CUNY colleges. The scholarship, as described within my thesis, "allows students who come from low-income families to attend a CUNY or a State University of New York (SUNY) college by providing them with tuition money" (2). It was a scholarship to help students graduate on time and it required the students to take 30 credits a year while maintaining a passing grade point average. I presented some statistics within our CUNY system about our graduation rates since Fall 2012; in comparison to the

59% of White college students graduating from CUNY schools, only 45% of Black students and 48% of Hispanic students are graduating within six years. Within a 4-year Bachelor's program, only 15% of Black students and 16% of Hispanic students are graduating from CUNY schools, according to the CUNY Office of Policy and Research. This information was presented to the CSI English Department back in 2018. I concluded that the outcome of these numbers could be for various reasons: students are not able to only prioritize their studies for personal and financial reasons, they aren't getting the individual help that they may need due to overcrowded classrooms, or they are simply not being seen or heard within their studies.

Our graduate students surprisingly had questions about how I was able to speak so freely in such a high-stakes paper. How was I able to say what I wanted to say, get my point across, and still have a mixture of both my informative voice and expressive voice present in my thesis? I answered their questions in three parts: First, *your thesis isn't just a paper; it's you joining in on a conversation.* While we are taught to write about ideas and themes in our papers as students, we never write our papers with the thought that there's an audience we are speaking to. Who do we want to speak to in our writing? Second, *write your thesis on something you're genuinely interested in and passionate about*. The importance of writing about something we're interested in or passionate about is that without even knowing, our voice becomes present in the piece. Third, *What drives you? What are you saying in your thesis that you want people to listen to?* Whether these MA students were writing their theses in Literature or in Rhetoric and Composition, the most important part of writing my thesis was that my passion and identity as a writer drove me to join in on the current conversations acknowledging and understanding that there is a lack of voice within student writers, specifically students in marginalized groups.

I am still reminded that balance and encouragement of other voices in the class are important elements to run a successful classroom. Carmen Kynard states the following in the syllabus she hands out for her college classes:

> Writing critically with and from multiple, informed sources is the most common trademark for the kind of writing that is expected of you in the academy. However, this does NOT mean: you write about things you don't care about, that you omit your own voice and perspective in order to be taken seriously. . . . ("Stank 2.0")

The way we get our students to break their strict use of their academic voice, we as educators have to encourage their expressive voices in our classrooms. Their ideas are important, their thought process is important, and their stories are what makes their writing unique to them. John Bean supports the idea of assigning "exploratory writing," because it "[adds] insights and signs of life [because] I'm not reading for error or coaching revision... often the thinking pieces are lively with voice and personality" (122). Allowing our students to discover the voice that is truly their own starts with the professor giving them the opportunity to do so.

Valuing Student Voices at College of Staten Island CUNY (Rosanne and Liz)

Since Liz graduated in 2018, six other students have completed an MA thesis in Rhetoric and Composition and six more intend to do so. We've talked about how the writing concentration within the MA program is now developing and also influencing our Writing Program. Readers might wish for some sort of proclamation, or wide-sweeping evidence, that the CSI Writing Program has changed, that we now have persuaded faculty to value students' voices, their rights to their own language, and to work against deficit stances in their thinking—that's not the case. The change is in the conversations we have with faculty. We still have a long way to go; our field still has a long way to go in throwing off its myths of standard English as a meal-ticket out of poverty. We have to keep talking about these issues; we have to keep publishing about these issues. We have to keep educating faculty, particularly graduate students and adjuncts, in the writing classroom about the harm that code-switching creates.

Rhetoric and Composition, however, has helped us see why developing a positive teacher-student relationship is so important—on the MA level and in Basic Writing. What truly concerns both of us are the comments that MA students and adjunct instructors sometimes make about their basic writing students' writing. To us, their comments could be construed as defeatist or negative. Often, instructors hold on to the belief that "good writing" is written strictly in an academic voice and they want to enforce the use of that voice. However, through this article, we are seeing how important the relationship between students and teachers is in helping students listen to and develop their own voices, rather than parroting that of the teacher. We hope that our current MA adjuncts and Writing Program instructors—as well

as our readers—look at writing instruction with a voice-focused and antiracist lens, and we think this happens through three main beliefs and practices:

- **Valuing Language Choices and Narrative**: All writers of scholarly discourse have the right to use their languages and dialects (i.e. to practice code-meshing) and to speak from their past experiences.
- **Challenging Deficit Stances**: Recognize biases around language use and actively challenge the supremacy of Standard American English.
- **Following Best Commenting and Assessment Practices**: Be positive and avoid an authoritative tone. Engage students and read their writing with the intent to listen for their developing voices rather than to correct them. Grade student writing based on content and labor, and not correctness.

We feel it is essential for MA students and other adjuncts to be exposed to composition theory as they pursue careers in NYC public schools or as college-level instructors of writing. A Rhetoric and Composition course aims to provide contextual, historical, and theoretical knowledge about education that can help instructors be able to practice these pedagogies within their own classrooms. As Liz discussed, she found her passion and drive to help college students through the issues and topics addressed in Rhetoric and Composition courses.

(*Liz's Closing Note)* My experience from taking Ro's class to writing my MA Thesis and now co-writing this article speaks for itself: I am determined to be a part of the conversations happening within the Basic Writing community in hopes that they are addressed and heard by many. I'm constantly thinking back to a quote from Gloria Anzaldua's book, *La Frontera: Borderlands;* "Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity—I am my language" (81). My social background, my upbringing, my story and my identity are what make up my voice. I am the voice that I speak. No matter how many times someone could try altering it or changing it completely, it always finds its way back to me. With my voice—the one I discovered on my own—I hope to help college students realize that it's okay to use their own voices and to use this crucial time in their lives to discover themselves.

Notes

1. According to department data, from Fall 2019 through Fall 2020, Black students in FYW exhibited a 16% higher rate of failure than their White and Asian peers and were twice as likely to withdraw, officially or unofficially; Hispanic students exhibited a 10% higher rate of failure than their White and Asian peers, and also were 1.6 times more likely to withdraw, officially or unofficially ("Why We Should Investigate Anti-Racist Writing Pedagogy," CSI English Department, Spring 2021).

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