

## Students' Rights and the Ethics of Celebration

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### ABSTRACT

*The celebration of student writing in its many forms is an ethical gray area due in no small part to the appearance of celebration as an unadulterated good. Many of our celebratory practices, however, involve problematic appropriations of student work for our own purposes, some of which may run counter to established professional guidelines for the teaching of writing as laid down by the CCCC. Our current understanding of celebration as beyond the scope of professional norms is due to the failure of the CCCC to live up to the promise of the 1974 resolution concerning Students' Right to their Own Language. The CCCC has, in effect, focused on the "language" aspect of the resolution at the expense of the idea of students' rights. This has resulted in a fuzziness concerning ethical uses of student work that has allowed student work to become an index of our own obsessions. Celebrations of writing in particular highlight our desperate yearning for "authentic" writing and for purity in the pedagogical encounter.*

In the last few years, there has been no shortage of writing programs that have created events designed to celebrate the work of student writers.<sup>1</sup> Small-scale efforts, such as those at the University of Rochester, involve simply sponsoring an annual essay contest ("Celebrating Writing"). More comprehensive efforts, at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, for example, take the form of an annual event that showcases work done in various writing classes and recognizes outstanding students. Arguably the most popular model, however, is the research-based capstone event. Representative in this regard is Eastern Michigan University's (EMU) semi-annual Celebration of Student Writing. EMU's event takes the form of poster sessions, where students create presentations based on their research and then engage with one another and interested faculty. This same type of celebration is (or at least has been) offered at schools as varied in their organization and student bodies as Texas A&M-Commerce and Pennsylvania's

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California University, both of which acknowledge EMU's event as their model. Another widely adopted form of celebration is the annual publication of a student writing anthology. UMass Amherst's writing program, for example, claims that its yearly anthology "rewards our student authors with public recognition and an opportunity to have their voices heard beyond the walls of the classroom" ("Our Students' Writing").<sup>2</sup>

The celebration of student writing is now a cornerstone of our professional practice. Certainly there are many good reasons for such celebration itself to be celebrated. It provides a capstone for a course (or sequence of courses) that many students experience as demanding and not a little discouraging; it is also potentially a way for students to recognize what they've learned in a way that may assist knowledge transfer. Taken individually and collectively, however, such celebrations raise a number of questions: precisely what or whom is being celebrated? Are we celebrating the mere fact that students can write? A particular kind of writing? Features of the work of a specific student writer? Are we celebrating the writer? The student? One obvious problem with the research-writing capstone event is that it can easily become more of a celebration of research than of writing (and I say that having helped to organize several research-writing capstone events).

Texas A&M-Commerce's writing program illustrates this tendency when it tells students, "This is your chance to show off all you have learned throughout the course of the term. You are the developing expert in the research site you investigated, so it only makes sense that you should have the chance to share your work with audiences that extend beyond your classmates and instructor" ("The Celebration of Student Writing" (CSW)). This exhortation also points to two related problems. The first is the degree to which celebrations encourage students to "show off." Hewett and McRuer, writing about the first iteration of the conference at my own institution, note that students are already thoroughly immersed in a capitalist model of compulsory demonstration of abilities for which they will be suitably rewarded: "Clearly the last thing our students need is another competitive public space to demonstrate and market their "skills" " (101).

A second problem inherent in the advice to students proffered by Texas A&M-Commerce is the effect that sharing one's work is supposed to have. The vaguely articulated value to the student that comes from "exposing" one's work is crystallized in the UMass Amherst's description of its student anthology. While affording students an "opportunity to have their voices heard beyond the walls of the classroom" sounds like a fine goal, in the case of this particular program, the goal is undermined by the fact that the primary function of the anthology appears to be to serve as a compulsory text in their writing classes. While the program's intentions are noble, I

hope I'm not the only one to see something a little problematic in the re-packaging of uncompensated work that students were, after all, *required* to produce in order to create a product that other students are *required* to buy. The larger issue—highlighted in this anthology example but evident in many celebrations of student writing—is that the conception of the audience for the writing celebration remains disturbingly vague and even, on occasion, a little misguided. Thus the writing program at UMass Amherst includes PDFs of the anthology on its website in order to “broaden our students’ readership” with little apparent realization that the primary audience for a university writing program website is students and faculty of that writing program: the same people, presumably, who already have access to the anthology.

The current emphasis on celebration is the product of the convergence of two trends in writing pedagogy: the widespread acceptance of student-centered teaching and learning practices, on the one hand, and an interest in encouraging students to engage with and write for “real” publics as a way of honing both their academic writing and citizenship skills. The problem with the current emphasis on celebration—evident in the examples I have sketched above—is that in our enthusiasm to celebrate the writing (or the student, or the research. . . ) we seem to check our critical faculties at the door. I cannot emphasize too strongly that I am not charging celebration organizers with some kind of malign agenda. It is, in fact, precisely due to celebration’s appearance as an unadulterated good—what harm could possibly be done by a celebration?—that the celebration of student writing is an ethical minefield. We are all familiar with situations where good intentions can have extremely problematic side effects. At the very least, enthusiasm unaccompanied by reflection may blind us to problems with the assumptions on which our celebratory practices rest. Moreover, it is worth asking, as Hewett and McRuer do, if some forms of celebration may work *against* our attempts to develop a critical, sophisticated approach to writing in our students: by equating effective writing simply with public recognition, for example, or emphasizing conferences and anthologies as instances of celebrity and résumé-building rather than sites of intellectual exchange. Lastly, our celebratory practices deserve scrutiny not least for the fact that what we as teachers of writing seem to end up celebrating most often is actually not the student or their writing but, as I will show, our teaching and ourselves—even, paradoxically, in the act of denying the influence of our teaching.

Our professional organizations such as the CCCC and NCTE are virtually silent in terms of position statements and policy guidelines governing the use of student work in celebratory contexts. This is troubling because

some of our celebratory practices may in fact end up violating other guidelines governing the use of student work. Before I look more closely at some of these practices and their implications, I want to trace the origin of this silence to the rather ambiguous reception of what many of our formal and informal writing histories treat as the founding document of a student-centered pedagogy: the CCCC's position statement on "Students' Right to their Own Language" (hereafter SRTOL), adopted in 1974. It was this document, moreover, that played a key role in the growing sense of the teaching of writing as a field that needed to be subject to professional norms: functionally, SRTOL laid the groundwork for all the later position statements of professional practice and ethics formulated by the CCCC.

Among the wide range of position statements that the CCCC has advanced over the years, SRTOL is the only resolution centrally concerned with articulating a set of rights for students and—more importantly—positioning that set of rights as ethically distinct from our teaching practice.<sup>3</sup> Despite its pivotal role in our professional and pedagogical history, calls to rework SRTOL to accommodate the different cultural and professional circumstances of the twenty-first century have systematically been ignored; the CCCC instead rather vaguely reaffirmed the existing resolution in 2003. The CCCC refusal to rework the resolution is a response to a rather troubling possibility raised but kept contained in the original resolution. What if students were understood to possess not just conditional rights to the "dialects of their nurture" (1) but *exclusive, all-inclusive* rights to *all* their languages, including those they produce in our classes? That we do not currently have such a guiding resolution is, I argue, the enabling condition of many of our celebratory practices and also the condition that underpins some of their more problematic elements.

Naturally, I am not assuming that our everyday practices fall neatly into line behind official position statements. Nevertheless, these documents play important evidentiary, representational and formative roles: they help constitute writing studies as a discipline and influence the ways in which we represent ourselves as teachers and programs to administrators and colleagues in other disciplines. Position statements and resolutions also offer information and guidance to practitioners, an important role given that the typical route whereby people arrive at teaching in our profession (still mainly through literary study) itself isn't necessarily grounded in a strong practice of the teaching of writing (an even greater challenge for WID or WAC programs). Therefore, when I began this project, I assumed two things: 1) that most of my audience would be familiar with the SRTOL resolution, and 2) that it had exerted a profound influence on the development of our profession. The first assumption turned out not to be true at

all and the second to be under dispute. The CCCC Language Policy Committee, in its 2000 Language Knowledge and Awareness Survey, found that almost two thirds of its nearly one thousand respondents had never heard of the resolution (14).<sup>4</sup> Therefore, since the resolution now seems like a discarded relic in the midden of our profession's theoretical archaeology I quote it in full here:

We affirm the students' right to their own patterns and varieties of language—the dialects of their nurture or whatever dialects in which they find their own identity and style. Language scholars long ago denied that the myth of a standard American dialect has any validity. The claim that any one dialect is unacceptable amounts to an attempt of one social group to exert its dominance over another. Such a claim leads to false advice for speakers and writers, and immoral advice for humans. A nation proud of its diverse heritage and its cultural and racial variety will preserve its heritage of dialects. We affirm strongly that teachers must have the experiences and training that will enable them to respect diversity and uphold the right of students to their own language. (1)

While the resolution was targeted explicitly by the neo-conservative back-to-basics movement of the 1980s, this does not fully explain the oblivion to which the SRTOL resolution has been consigned; still less does it explain the partial remembering exemplified by the vague reaffirmation of the resolution in 2003.<sup>5</sup> One explanation is offered by Smitherman, one of the resolution's original authors, who highlights a crucial tension between the SRTOL initiative and the National Language Policy (NLP, often referred to as "Language Plus"), adopted in 1988. For some teachers, she notes, the latter policy may have been understood to replace the former resolution because of the perception that it focused not just on "marginalized" groups but upon the necessity of multilingual competence of everyone (369).<sup>6</sup> At least, that would be a reasonable supposition if anyone had actually heard of the NLP. In fact, the Language Policy and Awareness Survey indicates that about the same number of people had never heard of either the National Language Policy or the SRTOL resolution.

Moreover this narrative of supercession only works if we consider SRTOL to be solely concerned with language diversity. The aspect of this resolution that seems to have been forgotten most completely is that which is hidden in plain sight: in the title, in the first line. This resolution isn't just about language rights, it is about *students' rights*. The resolution and its accompanying statement potentially raise issues of power and empowerment in the classroom and prompt all teachers not simply to address issues

of linguistic diversity but to do so within a framework of a more student-centered pedagogy.<sup>7</sup>

The original resolution is not without its problems. The supporting statement in particular is often contradictory in its treatment of language. Students, for example, have their “own” language but that language is also possessed by groups. Indeed, when the supporting statement shifts from a discussion of reading to writing, the focus changes from dialect as a language of students’ nurture, to multiple dialects as languages of choice:

In communication one may choose roles which imply certain dialects, but the decision is a social one, for the dialect itself does not limit the information which can be carried, and the attitudes may be most clearly conveyed in the dialect the writer finds most congenial. Dialects are all equally serviceable in logic and metaphor. (11)

The statement thus envisions multiple occasions for writing, but in what strikes me as a peculiarly US conception of democratic opportunity, blithely asserts that these can be navigated simply by employing an individual’s freedom of choice. What is missing is an acknowledgement of the multiple ways in which contexts of production and reception serve to constrain our language choices. (Myself, I would love to be able to convey my ideas in “the dialect the writer finds most congenial.” I am, however, routinely criticized by my colleagues for doing so, mainly because of the amount of profanity that is typically involved.) Finally, one of the very strange things about the supporting statement is that for all the attention to pedagogy, the classroom is portrayed as having very little effect on the students’ language. Students arrive in the classroom with their own dialect—the language of their nurture—and if the teaching/learning encounter goes well, they may improve their ability to articulate themselves in the dialect, but their language remains essentially unchanged. The resolution and its supporting statement are, then, ultimately shaped by a simplistic pedagogy of individual voice.

Due to these many limitations, calls mounted for a reworked version of the SRTOL that would be more in sync with changed cultural and professional circumstances surrounding the teaching of writing. For example, in 2000 the CCCC Language Policy Committee’s *Language Knowledge and Awareness Survey* (LKAS) drew on a 1983 report (by the Committee on the Advisability of a Language Statement for the 1980s and 1990s) to point out that the SRTOL resolution was “a bold but isolated philosophical statement . . . [that] has had little discernible effect upon English teaching in the elementary and secondary schools” (quoted in LKAS, 27). The Language Policy Committee also forcefully recommended, among other things, that

a “*Students’ Right* document for the Twenty-First Century should be developed, one that would reflect the last quarter century’s advances in research on language and linguistic diversity” (29). The need for a new SRTOL initiative was arguably even more evident after the 2001 publication of Bruce Horner’s “‘Students’ Right,’ English Only, and Re-imagining the Politics of Language.” In a nuanced analysis, Horner argues that despite its strengths the SRTOL resolution is an example of “a pervasive, tacit policy of “English Only” in composition and of a constellation of assumptions about languages and language users, that continues to cripple both public debate on English Only and compositionists’ approaches to matters of “error”. . . .” (742). Despite such critiques the original SRTOL resolution was updated in November 2003 only with this brief statement: “Realizing the continued need to preserve our Nation’s diverse heritage of languages and language varieties, the CCCC reaffirms and upholds its 1974 position statement” (41).

The limited impact of the SRTOL upon teaching practice and the unwillingness of the 4Cs to do more than pose with the resolution for a touching family portrait is in part due to the constraining effect that resulted from an understanding of the resolution as concerned only with issues of language diversity. Even attempts to argue for a more radical role for the SRTOL still focus on language issues as the key to a full resolution of issues of power, bias, and representation (see, for example, Kinloch). An alternative approach, one that bears directly on the ethics of celebration, is suggested by Carmen Kynard in the course of an argument that both resumes the Civil Rights era conversations about language and representation that shaped the SRTOL and defends the initiative against some of the subsequent attempts to de-radicalize it.

Today the possibilities for SRTOL, always imagined and yet never fully achieved, fall squarely in line with our inadequate responses to the antisystemic nature of sixties social justice movements. The legacy of SRTOL and its current possibilities can only be understood inside of the calls for change forwarded by the Black Power Movements that exist outside of our current imaginations of and workings toward a linguistically diverse, ethno-middle class that can code-switch to match “codes of power” (Lisa Delpit’s term) instead of undoing them. (371)

Kynard’s argument that the promise of reinterpreting the SRTOL lies in seeing it not simply as a resolution about language but one whose focus is “antisystemic” changes the nature of the conversation. Horner ties this anti-systemic project to a more student-centered pedagogy. He notes that,

in making the SRTOL's gesture, what has often been overlooked is students' already existing potential and active agency—students' power—as writers, to work with, within, and through language, in their own and others' use of language, to respond to and against the material social conditions of the place in which they find themselves, in order to better that place. (755)

In fact, what Horner is advocating and what, arguably, most celebrations of writing are predicated upon, takes an additional step: the move from a student-centered pedagogy to what I would characterize as a *student-involved* pedagogy.

In this entirely laudable endeavor, two problems are immediately apparent. The first is: whose agency? Student agency is not the only kind that is at stake in our writing celebrations. At least as important to most of the celebrations I've studied or in which I've participated is the desire to foreground the event as a counter to a reductive cultural perception of writing itself as an activity that lacks meaningful agency. Equally, celebrations of writing are celebrations of the teaching of writing, a reassertion of agency by practitioners who are routinely denigrated by administrators, other academic disciplines and the culture at large. What happens when these assertions of agency begin to overwhelm the student agency that is supposed to be at the heart of our celebrations? When, for example, students become exhibits to support a particular theory of writing, or arguments for the necessity of institutional support for a writing program? What enables this slippage is a reluctance fully to consider the materiality of our celebratory practices. While Horner himself seems to be attentive to this dimension, he equates materiality simply with "conditions" and "place." Yet public conferences, anthologies, etc. are not just matters of conditions and place: they are rendered material through artifacts produced by student writers: essays, posters, PowerPoints, presentations.

From an "antisystemic" perspective, not just language differences but power differences are crucial; these power differences shape the technologies and artifactual forms underlying acts of communication. Focusing only on students' language, even in more radical re-considerations of SRTOL means, ironically, that the one question central to students' language rights never gets asked because it is so thoroughly embedded in power relationships: students may have a right to the language of their nurture, but who owns the languages produced in our classrooms and their various material instantiations? If the original resolution understands "language" to be heavily shaped by (if not entirely synonymous with) voice, and, moreover, if language is defined as both pre-existent to the classroom encounter and largely unaffected by it—if, finally, the students' right to their own language is



thereby effectively so circumscribed *as not to cover the actual writing artifacts produced in our classes*, then a number of potential issues with our professional practice are neatly avoided. The rights that are secured for students by the 2003 reaffirmation are precisely those that don't threaten our ability to use student writing in a variety of contexts—including celebrations—necessary to secure and enhance our professional presence.

Consider, for example, the CCCC position statement on assessment, a useful and considered set of guidelines for how to design and implement responsible assessment projects. But the statement has nothing to say about the use of assessment data, and it is at this point that a broader view of students' right to their own language would throw a spanner in the works of many everyday assessment practices. The common practice at my own institution, for example, is to regard all assessment data used for program development and in-house evaluation as exempt from the requirements that surround those contexts where results might be published externally as part of faculty research projects (and which need to go through an IRB approval process). If students were held to have a right to their own language, regardless of the context of its production or the purposes for which it was produced, then we would not be able to be so cavalier with our assessment usages. Likewise, the CCCC's statements on teaching in digital environments and working with electronic portfolios nowhere acknowledge the ethical implications of the fact that these technologies have facilitated our ability to reproduce and distribute student writing more easily and widely than ever before, in ways potentially not envisaged or intended by student authors or even their teachers (our annual reporting process, for example, requires that I submit a selection of student work as evidence of "effective" teaching).

Moreover, if we really believe that the students' right to their own language includes the full spectrum of languages they invent, nurture, protect, hide manipulate, fake, mangle and abandon in our classes, then one of the most problematic areas of our practice becomes the celebration of student writing. In the first place, the celebration of student writing seems to stand apart from all the other practices for which the CCCC's position statements seek to establish a set of disciplinary norms. We aren't grading student writing, we aren't providing feedback, we aren't assessing it, we aren't researching it, we aren't publishing it. . . hey, we're just celebrating it! Depending on the kind of celebration we are staging, however, we may in fact be doing some or all of these things and doing them in ways where we violate the disciplinary norms that the CCCC has tried to establish precisely because they don't seem to apply to a "celebration." To take just one example, the guidelines on the ethical conduct of research stress the importance of obtaining

the consent of any students in photographs before their publication; yet at my own institution, we have routinely violated this principle in the images we publish on the website associated with our research and writing symposium (University Writing Program).

The celebration of student writing exposes one of the central tensions in our classrooms: who is responsible (in several senses) for the writing produced therein? This is actually two questions: first, who produces the writing in our classes, and second, who then gets to speak for that writing? Students “produce” the writing, but only if we understand that act in the same light as factory workers producing widgets. Alternatively, teachers “produce” the writing, but only if we understand that act in the same light as a Hollywood producer working behind the scenes to secure the funding, keep everything on schedule, and make sure the director stays off the sauce. Celebrations of writing thus represent the point at which two premises concerning our conflicted attitude toward the classroom and our own agency meet. We want to insist upon the importance and influence of our own teaching practice; on the other hand, a desire not to take all the credit leads us to attempt to erase the influence of our labor. For the most part, our professional discourse deals with this conflict through two complementary strategies: attempting to erase the material influence of the classroom, on the one hand, and insisting upon the possibility of “authentic” student writing as the defining criteria of value.

The hunger for the authentic that saturates our professional discourse (a search for authentic moments of engagement, authentic epiphanies, authentic arguments) may seem quixotic. So much of our writing and research about teaching problematizes the classroom in useful ways. Rarely, however, do we confront the brute fact of the writing classroom itself: compared with the many non-instructional situations in which writing takes place, our classrooms are the most artificial, highly constructed, overdetermined, constrained, *systemic*, contexts imaginable. That anything “authentic” should be produced in such an artificial situation is highly unlikely. Yet this can all be made to work, the authentic can still be conjured via celebration, through an answer to the second part of the question I outlined above: who gets to speak for the writing produced in our classes? The answer, resoundingly, is that teachers do. Students may help with the logistics of our celebrations, writing teachers almost always tightly control the discourse surrounding the celebration.

This concern with authenticity is evident even in those moments where we seek to challenge its power, such as Hewett and McRuer’s discussion of the origins of the *Composition and Cultural Studies Conference*, the forerunner of my institution’s current *University Writing and Research Symposium*.

Their article is a deft and focused analysis of the way in which composition teachers and student writers are enmeshed in the university's implementation of the capitalist drive toward increased "flexibility" and "efficiency," and the authors argue persuasively for student writing events conceived of as, in effect, resistant anti-celebrations. Both authors are, as I noted earlier, highly skeptical of traditional forms of celebration that locate the authenticity of writing in an act of individual genius. This fixation on forms of student expression, they argue, tends both to obscure and forestall the possibility that students might adopt an activist stance in their writing:

The relocation of student voices that an activist pedagogy encourages helps to stall the production of passive student bodies and of environments that can only protect monovocal, hegemonic speech. Student activists have composed, and can continue to compose, alternative publics. Their activism has the potential to disrupt the flexible university as they write into existence new ways of knowing and as they collectively and disputatiously write their way into new locations. (106)

Yet while Hewett and McRuer mount a fierce critique of authorized institutional skills-based definitions of authenticity, they simply shift the goal posts in order to privilege a celebration of a different kind of authentic writing: activist writing that "authentically" challenges hegemonic cultural narratives.

Not surprisingly, therefore, among the CCCC position documents I referenced earlier, the very few moments that seem to imply a more comprehensive student ownership of writing and utterance betray a yearning for authenticity. The guidelines for electronic portfolios, for example, include a section on "Virtual Identities" that argues "Students represent themselves through personalized information that conveys a web-savvy and deliberately constructed ethos for various uses of the e-portfolio. Students manage those identities by having control over artifacts and who sees them." While the idea that we can manage identity simply through controlling access seems more than a little simplistic, it is the insistence that students construct a virtual identity through "personalized" information that is the attention grabber. Although the suggested principle seems to partake of the relentless insistence upon the BlogFaceTweeing publication of self so characteristic of our online environments, it also seems to betray a deep fear of the fact that the real power of a virtual identity is in fact to do just the opposite: fake the self.

This hunger for authenticity, the belief in our students' ability to provide it and in our special teacherly ability to recognize it, is also evident

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in the CCCC's position statement on "Guidelines for Ethical Conduct of Research." In the section that describes the importance of quoting students fairly, accurately, and with permission, we are told that "Composition specialists report written and spoken statements accurately. They interpret the statements in ways that are faithful to the writer's or speaker's intentions, and they provide contextual information that will enable others to understand the statements the way the writer intended." While the intention behind the resolution is undoubtedly to prevent the misappropriation of student writing, is this not also a rather remarkable instance of the long discredited intentional fallacy offered as a rationale by one of our major professional writing organizations? It is precisely this kind of slippage, the moment where our official discourse doesn't quite walk the established theoretical talk, which suggests that our ideals of political responsibility remain in conflict with some very traditional notions of the nature, purpose, and authorship of writing. It is this conflict that generates the ambiguity surrounding many of our celebratory enterprises.

Elsewhere I have argued that even as specific notions of voice and intention underwent a post-structuralist hammering by rhetoric and composition scholars, the continued fascination with the broader category of authenticity on the part of writing teachers is due in large part to our discomfort with the idea that our classrooms are essentially simulation chambers that task students with producing the best possible simulations of "real" writing (Mullen). To be sure, in this discomfort, there is a more wide-ranging anxiety at work. Turkle, for example, has argued that given our awareness that we inhabit a broader culture of simulation, "the notion of authenticity is for us what sex was for the Victorians—threat and obsession, taboo and fascination" (Turkle 4). Yet, cultural anxieties notwithstanding, there is no reason why the more specific concept of the classroom as simulation space should make writing teachers uncomfortable; in other academic disciplines and particularly outside academia, simulation occupies a highly valued place in many learning contexts.

That there is nevertheless discomfort can be traced to two sources. The first is that while the "post-structuralist turn" produced a lot of light and noise, it did not do a lot of damage to the notion of "real" writing as the distinctive product of an individual subjectivity. Thus, our professional literature continues to highlight new pathways to the production of authentic writing, particularly in the form of teaching initiatives that supposedly produce "real" writing in "real contexts" (the service learning movement, for example, is rife with such claims). The second reason is that an ideal of authenticity is built into what is for many composition scholars and practitioners the bedrock of their practice: critique. Recently, Lynch has argued

that scholars representing what he terms “the apocalyptic turn” in composition all offer challenges to the profession’s definition of critique as the ability to unmask the real, the authentic, the true: “As it is traditionally defined, critical thinking suggests a revelation: throwing down the idols and getting behind the shadows” (Lynch 458–59). The problem, Lynch notes, particularly for critical pedagogy, is that “To spend all one’s time insisting that reality is mere shadow is to spend all one’s time looking at mere shadow” (469), thus producing a “trained incapacity” to see the world around us and intervene in it productively (463).

The irony here is that simulation or, to be blunt, the fake, may actually be a more productive description of both our everyday practices and their potential than the more idealized notions of authenticity. As Eubanks and Schaeffer argue in their bracing “A Kind Word for Bullshit: The Problem of Academic Writing,” misrepresentation of intent, fakery and inauthenticity of all kinds abound in both our disciplinary writing and our classrooms. If you pressed most writing teachers, they would acknowledge that the best we can hope for from our classes is to aspire to the “as if:” Students write *as if* they were writing for an authentic audience, *as if* they were doing authentic research, *as if* they were developing an authentic voice. Yet in the context of the celebration of writing, the “as if” of our classes drops out. As I have demonstrated at the beginning of this essay, our various celebratory contexts—ranging from writing prizes, published collections (electronic or print) of student writing, student writing and research colloquia, symposia, portfolia—all are branded with the implicit promise that this writing is, in some vaguely defined sense, authentic. You never see an anthology of “excellent” student writing prefaced by this comment: “These examples of student writing were produced in classes that students were required to take, in sections chosen mostly on the basis of the number of chili peppers the instructor received on RateMyProfessor, and where they had little or no choice in the kind of assignments they were required to complete, much less whether or not to complete them.” This, in fact, seems to be what our celebrations are really celebrating: the dream of a decontextualized ideal of authenticity that stands outside the classroom as a necessarily compromised site of writing production.

Moreover, many celebratory occasions (particularly published collections and research presentations) establish their authenticity in accordance with the position statements that treat a student’s work as the product of a single authorial genius, independent of the work of peer reviewers or, tellingly, our own teaching labor. In the early years of The George Washington University’s *University Writing and Research Symposium*, we experimented with group presentations as an alternative to such celebrations of individu-

alism. Some classes staged collective performances based on research work into memorializing the Holocaust. An entire class guided their session audience through an experiment in manifesto writing. About a dozen students spread across two sections I was teaching planted one of their number on a traditional panel and then “interrupted” his presentation on gender and videogames to re-stage the cut-and-thrust of a vigorous online discussion we had had on the topic. Since that time, however, such experiments in a collective and collaborative notion of research, writing, presentation, and celebration have diminished until in its final year, the old Symposium was entirely given over to traditional academic panel presentations. Ostensibly this was in response to the need to streamline the symposium to accommodate more students, render the selection process more efficient, and maximize the use of venues. The fact that our entire faculty, including myself, acquiesced in this shift suggests, however, that our logistical imaginations are heavily shaped by the single-author model, the “natural” mode to which we will default when things get organizationally challenging (We have since extensively reworked this event and I discuss those changes briefly below).

There are, of course, powerful sociocultural factors that bear upon our seemingly perverse desire to insist on writing as the product of the lone literary genius even as evidence piles up refuting simplistic conceptions of authenticity, voice and authorship.<sup>8</sup> It is also entirely possible, as Eubanks and Schaeffer point out, to build an engaging pedagogy around the inauthentic, a concept they term “productive bullshit” that embraces “faking it” as a necessary precursor to “making it.” This, they note, is a concept that goes back to Isocrates: one needs to act as if one is already what one hopes to become (377, 385). However, what interests me here is that the uses to which we put students’ writing in the act of celebration (especially when understood through the lens of a more expansive definition of SRTOL) deny the authenticity of student writing even in the act of insisting upon it. Or rather, it may be authentic, but it isn’t the students’ own. For if students really do “own” their own language (in however problematic a sense), they might not authorize some of the uses to which we put their work, even in the context of celebrating it/them.

How often in our published works is an argument that purports to be about the student and/or their writing really about the teacher? Look, colleagues, this excellent outstanding, engaged, mature writing was summoned forth by my teaching (I myself have used this move in conference presentations and publications). For example, consider the way that Hewett and McRuer (the title of whose article is “Composing Student Activists”) introduce their subject: “In this chapter, we discuss the way radical teachers working within a cultural studies tradition (such as ourselves) work against

the dominant ideological framework, encouraging the development of—and “going public” with—students’ varied creative abilities. . .” (98). This is an enlightened view of students, but at the same time it is the teachers who are the active agents in this piece: they are the ones doing all the encouraging, interpreting, defining, supporting, etc. At the same time, Hewett and McRuer clearly recognize the “hero-teacher” model rearing its ugly head and struggle against it. At one point, discussing a student panel that had the potential to become quite contentious, the authors respond: “However, we were committed to composing student-activists—meaning not that we were committed to shaping student-activists into some prescribed activist mold, but rather that we were committed to understanding the writers and speakers with who we had worked all semester as composing student-activists” (104). The double sense of “composing” here—students as people who are shaped and who are themselves active shapers—is possibly deliberate, but notice how, even in an obvious attempt to back away from the “hero-teacher” move, the phrase “we were committed” is repeated three times in the space of as many lines.

Trying to efface the influence of our teaching is not necessarily a more ideologically defensible position than adopting the standpoint of the hero-teacher. Both roles do, however, point to the degree to which we writing teachers seem unable to avoid tying ourselves to a notion of an authentic writing performance in order to justify our sense of self and the legitimacy of our pedagogies. In the context of celebration, the writing is treated as if it is generated by a single student author, with the teacher having done little more than provide the necessary classroom space. Behind the scenes of these celebrations, however, the writing is often firmly tied to the authenticity of the teacher’s pedagogy itself. I witnessed the latter phenomena in later iterations of the conference whose origins are detailed by Hewett and McRuer. In corridors and cafes after and during the conference, student writing was routinely treated as an index of the teaching that produced it; sometimes in a joking way, often in the form of collegial compliment, but occasionally to denigrate the pedagogy of particular teachers.

In a larger sense, therefore, our celebrations do not stand outside the often fraught institutional contexts in which our writing programs are embedded. Indeed, the tensions inherent in those institutional contexts often call these celebrations into being. The faculty members in my program, for example, value our own student research and writing symposium as a tactical resource in various ongoing battles with our administration; this is perhaps inevitable, given the politics of our institutions. However, when students sign up to be celebrated (assuming that they do sign up) are

they consenting to the use of their writing in administrative power games, or as a stick with which to beat their teacher?

Many of the issues that I've raised here may not in fact present any kind of problem for our practice when fully considered. Perhaps, too, celebrating student writing simply casts into sharp relief many of the ethical challenges that are endemic to our profession. The problematic appropriation of student writing, for example, is of a piece with the ethics of representation we often struggle with in the company of our students, the maze of nuances that distinguish speaking for someone from speaking in place of someone from speaking with someone . . . and so on. The difficulty of escaping the trap wherein a discourse that purports to be about our students is in fact mostly about us may reflect the institutional and professional pressures that ensure that even our best work cannot free itself from the taint of shameless self-promotion.

Nevertheless, it is significant that one of our major professional organizations has been attentive to promoting ethical behavior in a wide range of practices associated with teaching and researching writing but the ethical gray areas inherent in the idea of "celebration" have not been fully considered. The issues surrounding the celebration of student writing—who is being celebrated, by whom, and for what purpose—are both illuminated by the idea that students possess a right to their own language and raise a set of provocative questions. However, the practical legacy of SRTOL seems to be just the opposite of what was intended. Far from focusing our attention on classroom practice and the participation of both language *and* teaching in systems of power and privilege, the resolution has blinded us to those by providing us with a discourse replete with authentic gestures of recognition. We shouldn't forget that it was SRTOL that strongly affirmed students' right not just to "the dialects of their nurture" but to the "dialects in which they find their own identity and style," a move that sets the stage for an authenticity grail quest. Therefore, without wanting to go all Oliver Stone on the issue, the reluctance to even revisit the SRTOL resolution, much less rework it, has at the very least been professionally convenient for the CCCC and its membership. The idea that students possess rights that inhere even in a context where they are being celebrated bears on a more troubling question: to what extent is the celebratory impulse, seemingly so well-intentioned and worthy, participating in a process that treats writing within a framework of compulsory publicity? To what degree are our celebrations implicated in the various educational movements that insist that learning can be reduced to externalized, immediately measurable demonstrations of outcomes? In a troubling irony, our fixation on an unreflective celebration of authenticity may reinforce the same reductive, systemic,



consumption-driven view of writing that so many of our celebrations are attempting to overcome.

I have never been a fan of professional over-bureaucratization, even (or maybe especially) when it is well-meaning; the extraordinary hoops that many of us have to jump through to acquire human-subjects approval for even small-scale usage of student work is an example of how a justifiable concern can give birth to an unnecessarily burdensome process. The case for a separate resolution on the part of our professional organizations, one dealing explicitly with celebrating student work, might, therefore, seem flimsy, especially when elements applicable to the ethical situations inherent in celebratory situations seem to be present already in other resolutions. The “CCCC Guidelines for the Ethical Conduct of Research in Composition Studies” to which I alluded earlier, for example, emphasizes the importance of voluntary participation on the part of research subjects and their right to withdraw at any time.

As I have been arguing throughout this piece, however, it is precisely the ambiguous nature of celebration and the diffusion of applicable guidelines across a variety of official documents that make celebrations of student writing such an intriguingly problematic area. I would wager that there are few if any writing teachers who would consider their celebrations to be research in a way that would make the research guidelines applicable. Nevertheless, official resolutions are not the only solution; in the first place, their effect on practice presupposes widespread familiarity with official policy and professional guidance, a familiarity which, as I noted earlier, is in question even with some of our profession's most historically important initiatives. For that reason, I would suggest that there are three additional factors we as teachers can keep in mind when planning celebratory events at our own institutions.

First, our laudatory events should not celebrate writing in general but specific aspects of writing, lest they end up trivializing the very thing they seek to celebrate. To understand the danger inherent in generic celebrations of writing, consider for a moment a very different context and example that come from my current research interest: *The Art of Videogames* exhibition held recently at the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, D.C. This visually stunning exhibition combined hardware artifacts, commentary from designers and game studies scholars, playable demonstrations of games, interviews with players, and a variety of conceptual materials to argue for the intellectual sophistication and cultural importance of videogames. It was nevertheless an exhibition whose deeply conservative approach betrayed its anxiety concerning its central premise: that videogames are art. This anxiety is palpable even in the exhibition's hedging

title—many would concede that videogames involve art while not rising to the level of Art—as well as in its traditional historical organization (from “primitive beginning” to “sophisticated graphic wonder”).

To understand why this is a problem, consider the situation of painting. No one organizes an exhibition to prove that painting can be an art form. Exhibitions instead revolve around the work of particular artists, or periods, or genres, or cultural problematics. I fear we are in the same boat as the Smithsonian exhibit if we engage in abstract celebrations of writing. There is a whiff of desperation about the idea that writing in general needs to be celebrated: “no, really, writing is cool! You’ll see! Being a writer will make you lots of mon—. . . well, ok, it will get you a lot of respect. . . . Well, it is just really cool. That’s all!” Campus celebrations should instead simply assume that the awesomeness of writing is a fact and build events around more specific facets of writing: writing that contributes to public awareness of science, for example, or activist writing, autobiographical writing, writing involving archival work, and so on.<sup>9</sup>

An alternative response to the generic celebration problem is to make the celebration of writing almost a byproduct. We have taken this approach in my own writing program by turning our annual celebration into an explicitly pedagogical activity. The Research and Writing Conference brings in students from the previous semester of our first-year writing course to talk to students taking the course in the current semester. The student panels are geared explicitly toward offering other students advice about research and writing strategies and a discussion of the intellectual process that students went through while crafting their major research project. Students attending the conference receive a lot of specific advice from speakers to whom they are more disposed to listen (however much the advice may replicate what their own teachers have been telling them). Not every student in the audience walks away convinced that writing is a worthily complex, intellectually challenging and personally enriching activity. The fact that writing is all of these things, however, forms the organizational belief system that provides the framework for the event: we let the event show this, rather than feel that this is a truth that needs to be “celebrated.”

My final suggestion returns us to the document with which I began, the CCCC position statement on “Students’ Right to their Own Language.” If student writing is to be celebrated, then it is perhaps students who should be setting the agenda by deciding what aspects of their writing need to be celebrated or even whether their work needs to be celebrated at all. The focus of the SRTOL initiative was to emphasize that students are partners in a learning process. When students are only the subject of the event rather than being active in shaping the event itself, there is always the tendency

to reduce students to exhibits, curiosities framed by an unintentional but insistent diminution: "This is excellent work. . .for a student." Implementing all three of these suggestions could produce fundamentally different kinds of events. For example, students and faculty might collaborate on planning a half-day seminar on effective techniques for writing about science, one that put examples of work by students and faculty on an equal footing. Through such events we would not be abandoning our pedagogical mission, but would rather be strengthening it, in an ethically defensible manner, one consistent with the larger role for student expertise envisaged by the original SRTOL resolution almost thirty years ago.

## NOTES

1. An early version of this article was presented as "Gatecrashing the Student Writing Kegger" at the 2009 Council of Writing Program Administrators Conference in Minneapolis. I would like to thank my colleagues Rachel Riedner, Christy Zink, and Phyllis Ryder for feedback on an early draft of this paper, as well as Joseph Janangelo, Deb Dew, Alice Horning, and the anonymous reviewers of *WPA: Writing Program Administration* for their many helpful suggestions.

2. While many of these celebratory practices seem to date from the mid- to late-2000s, my former institution, the University of California at Irvine was creating annual student writing anthologies in the mid-90s. Likewise, the first version of my current institution's writing event, a multi-day research and writing conference, was piloted in 1998.

3. The resolution also stands apart from its descendants in its desire to make its subject visible as a contested domain of intellectual inquiry, supplementing the text of the resolution itself with an elaborate discussion of scholarly research into dialect and a substantial scholarly bibliography. In contrast, future resolutions and position statements would confine themselves mainly to recommendations and an articulation of best practices.

4. Interestingly, the lack of awareness of the resolution seems to correlate with the organizational affiliation of the survey respondents. The authors of the *Language Knowledge and Awareness Study* note that roughly 62% of their sample were members of NCTE with the remaining 38% belonging to CCCC. As Smitherman notes, the NCTE never adopted the SRTOL resolution, passing only a watered down version; ironically, however, despite the fact that fierce lobbying by the CCCC in order to secure NCTE support ultimately proved futile, many people are still under the impression that the NCTE authored the SRTOL resolution (371-72). The Committee on Language Policy's survey may suggest that the NCTE's reluctance to support the resolution plays a role in the lack of awareness of the initiative on the part of composition teachers.

5. Smitherman's 1999 retrospective concerning SRTOL demonstrates that 4Cs itself played a role in limiting the impact of the resolution on teaching practice as it flinched in the face of the conservative backlash (364–65). Similarly, Wible argues, following Horner, that basic writing pedagogy secured a foothold in the academy precisely because it turned its back on some of the more radical implications of classroom initiatives like those of the LCRG and successfully fused its approaches with those of the Back-to-Basics movement (466).

6. In fact, the problem with the “Students’ Right” movement seems to have been that its focus was understood to be even more exclusive than the broad category of “the marginalized.” Some textbook publishers, for example, rejected a textbook built around a SRTOL pedagogy with the comment that it would appeal only to an African American audience (Wible 462). The NLP, then, could be read as offering many teachers relief that language issues no longer applied simply to “them” but now to “all of us.”

7. For a document that ends up granting students inalienable rights, some of the discussion leading up to the resolution seems to have addressed this issue only glancingly, and then with a decidedly negative cast. Smitherman recounts how during the debates over the SRTOL one person had proposed using the word “people” in the title, but “someone remarked that we were dealing with “students,” not “people” ” (361).

8. Those of us in the privileged classes of the developing world are doing more writing, communicating with one another more often, are more “connected” than ever before. Yet it is hard to escape the impression that the need of writing teachers to stage periodic homages to authenticity (and to deny the inauthenticity of the classroom space) is driven at least in part by an awareness that whatever residual authenticity we may have felt we possessed is fast disappearing. In a telling analysis of the influence of new media on changing notions of friendship, Deresiewicz notes that while Facebook, for example, may provide the illusion of connection with myriad friends, you get “the sense that my friends are doing their best to impersonate themselves. . .” (B10).

9. I anticipate one obvious objection here. Many of our writing curricula, particularly at the freshman level, are either too formulaic in their assignments or too personalized to allow for programmatic or institutional celebrations focusing on specific writing issues. In either case there is often a rigid adherence to the fiction of the generic “academic research paper.” That may be true, but celebrations exist not just to heap praise on what is, but to hold up a vision of what might be.

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