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When Meaningful Writing Reflects Vincentian Values

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What do undergraduate students tell us about how and why they find and make meaning through their writing? What is the relationship between those findings and Vincentian values for education? In The Meaningful Writing Project – our study of over 700 seniors at three universities – students describe how these values are embodied in writing projects in and out of school. These projects were viewed by all respondents as the most meaningful of their undergraduate careers. In brief, our results show that students find meaning when they are invited to

- tap into the power of personal connection;
- see what they are writing as applicable and relevant to the real world;
- imagine their future selves;
- immerse themselves in what they are thinking and writing about;
- experience research for learning.

In many cases, the experiences students reported are aligned with Vincentian values for higher education, namely participation in learning communities of service, stewardship and lifelong, integral development (Kelly, 2008). In what follows, we draw on survey and interview responses to offer examples for each.

Meaningful Writing in Learning Communities of Service

Seniors described meaningful writing projects that grew from a variety of experiences with service, volunteerism and academic service learning. Kelly (2008), describes this type of service as “perceived and lived first as an attitude...and then as action” (p. 92). For example,

a student studying to be a physician assistant told us her most meaningful writing project was writing in an English course “about immigration and the hardships my family and I overcame during the beginning years of coming to America.” She said she hoped to do more writing like this in the future because she had “decided to work for the Chinese community as a career in life.” Another student’s meaningful writing project came in the form of a newsletter to family reporting on her work in a pediatric burn unit in China. Other students described experiences that turned their attention to homelessness in Oklahoma. One described her project’s meaningfulness more specifically: “The topic of homelessness in Norman is something that affects people near to us, and I thought it was important to know what issues are happening in your own town. This kind of project helps students to become better and more aware citizens.” These students show us that writing in a learning community of service can contribute to the development and demonstration of these values across the lifespan.

Meaningful Writing Toward Integral Learning and Future Selves

Students articulated how their experiences with their most meaningful writing projects could lead to future professional activities and described approaches, attitudes, or beliefs they intended to adopt in their post-graduation lives that would connect them interpersonally, communally, and globally. These connections to students’ personal goals and aspirations — often grounded in their desire to contribute to future communities — are in accord with the ideas of Kelly (2008) of “integral or authentic development — terminology

now used in Catholic social thought,” which “suggests comprehensive, holistic, and sustainable advancement within personal, interpersonal, communal, and global contexts” (p. 89).

This connection to future selves was also prevalent in students’ responses to whether their meaningful writing project connected to past and future writing. While 79% of students said the writing project they cited as most meaningful was something new for them, 69% said they would likely write something like the Meaningful Writing Project in the future. For example, a political science/international affairs double major whose project was to create “A Sustainable Path to World Peace” shared that she “really needed to dig deep and decide where I stand as a person. There are many approaches that could be taken on this project; I had to decide which one I agreed with morally.” In the future, she told us, “I hope to someday have a career in peacekeeping, possibly for the UN or as a mediator in a local capacity.” Another student said her “honors research project allowed [her] to explore bilingual education in Panama and Peru” and went on to explain: “I am interested in many careers related to bilingual education. This includes becoming an ESL teacher or a teacher in a bilingual classroom, working in community outreach to the Hispanic community, and raising my children to be bilingual.”

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Meaningful Writing and Stewardship

Kelly (2008) notes that an “increasing emphasis on social responsibility and accountability offers a counter-influence to the materialism and consumerism in first-world nations that also impacts other nations, especially their poor” (p. 91). Many of our survey respondents described meaningful writing projects in which they were able to practice and prepare for stewardship. When she was a first-year student, a finance major was asked to write a business plan and develop “the mission and values for the company.” As a

senior, she told us “Writing about what was the meaning behind the company and the company’s actions and output was inspiring to me. The assignment reconfirmed the reason why I want to be in business. I want to make a difference with what business practices I follow and how I provide a certain good or service to consumers.” When she described why this project would remain important in the context of her future goals, she wrote: “I want to make sure that no matter what organization I may work for, I want to continue to uphold and represent the mission and values of the organization. I want to make sure that moral and beneficial business practices transcend not only throughout the company itself but the community around it.” A student majoring in environmental studies with minors in Spanish and Latino/a and Caribbean studies described her most meaningful project, written while studying in Costa Rica as a junior: “I chose to write about the ecosystem services provided by an acre of shade-grown coffee and tried to quantify the value.”

What was important about that junior year project was that “it got me interested in environmental consulting”.

Supporting Students’ Meaningful Writing and Engagement with Vincentian Values

In *Soul-Building: Students’ Perspectives on Meaning, Purpose, and the College Experience*, Welkener and Bowsher (2012) write: “It seems that existential questions, the questions of “Who am I?” and “Why am I here?” should be central to institutions of higher education that prepare scholars and leaders to think critically, act with social concern, and make decisions that are ethical and just” (p. 2). They go on to ask: “But would our students say that we are preparing them to answer such questions? And if so, where and how?” (p. 2). We challenge educators to consider how writing projects can connect students with Vincentian values, because, as we have seen, meaningful writing can emerge from engagement

with them and contribute to developing these important ideas.

Specifically, we learned from our study that faculty can use writing to prepare students to take on such questions and produce meaningful work. We saw assignments that invited students to see how their writing can be relevant in the real-world, applicable to learn course content, and to research to deepen their learning. These teaching practices simultaneously allow us to engage with undergraduate writers as they participate in learning communities of service, helping them imagine their present and future stewardship and nurture their lifelong, integral development. Cultivating students' meaningful writing and learning experiences, then, offers the promise of an undergraduate education in which faculty "have a unique role in fostering this integral (body, mind, and spirit) development of their students" (Kelly, 2008, p. 91).

For more information on The Meaningful Writing Project, see: www.meaningfulwritingproject.net

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