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## The Power of Personal Connection for Undergraduate Student Writers

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# The Power of Personal Connection for Undergraduate Student Writers

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*In our research study, the Meaningful Writing Project, over one third of our 707 respondents indicated that a writing project was meaningful when they were able to make what we describe as a personal connection. Based on analysis of this subset of responses, we offer a student-driven construct of what makes writing meaningful to undergraduates: Meaningful writing assignments allow students to make and extend personal connections to their experiences or histories, their social relationships, and/or subjects and topics for writing. We agree with other researchers that writing instruction in higher education has been dominated by assignment of transactional tasks in service to the mastery of academic discourse. We suggest embracing an orientation to student writing and the processes of writing that would truly capitalize on the experiences, beliefs, and aspirations students bring to their learning. By valuing the personal connections students make through writing, and designing instruction that makes such connections possible, we can engage an expansive frame for learning and writing that invites and sustains undergraduate students' agency and identity in higher education.*

## Introduction

In US higher education, the widespread acceptance of writing across the curriculum/writing in the disciplines (Russell, 2002) and the continued presence of required first-year writing means that students may be writing regularly across all years of their undergraduate careers. Hoping to learn more about students' writing experiences across institutions, researchers have been asking questions such as: What types of writing tasks are students encountering across disciplines? To what degree are students experiencing writing as a means of engaging deeply with their learning?

Recent evidence to answer the first question comes from Melzer's (2014) study of over 2,000 writing assignments from 400 courses across 100 different institutions. Melzer reports that the purpose of more than 8 in 10 assignments was "transactional," and the majority of those were "informative" rather than "persuasive," with a teacher-examiner as the primary intended reader (Melzer, 2014, pp. 21–23).

In contrast, the second question is addressed in a large-scale study by Anderson, Anson, Gonyea, and Paine (2015), who explored students' experiences of writing in higher education and the relationship of students' writing to their learning and engagement by considering just over 70,000 students' responses to the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and additional writing module questions added to the NSSE. From their quantitative analysis of this large data set, Anderson et al. developed three pedagogical recommendations for teaching with writing based on what their sample revealed about the factors that have the greatest impact on students' learning: the "interactive writing processes" they are asked to engage in, the "meaning-making writing tasks" they are assigned, and the "clear writing expectations" their faculty provide for them as they write (Anderson et al., 2015).

We juxtapose these two recent studies to highlight the challenges of researching students' experiences of writing across the curriculum and in the disciplines in US higher education. While Anderson et al. (2015) offer survey-based evidence of what makes a writing assignment engaging for students, we learn from Melzer (2014) that those elements of engagement are unfortunately rare. Additionally, common models of how students attain writing "expertise" in higher education (e.g., Beaufort, 2007) position students largely as recipients of "knowledge" (including knowledge about writing), rather than active knowledge makers who can draw on personal and social resources—what Guerra (2008, 2016) describes as "learning incomes." And while there exist studies of writing at single institutions and individual case studies of college writers (e.g., Beaufort, 2007; Carroll, 2002; Haswell, 1991; Hilgers, Hussey, & Stitt-Bergh, 1999; Jarratt, Mack, Sartor, & Watson, 2009; Sternglass, 1997), we have few large-scale, cross-institutional studies in which students describe their writing experiences in their own words. To address this gap, we developed the Meaningful Writing Project (funded by a 2010–2011 CCCC Research Initiative Grant), in which 707 students across three institutions responded to the following: "(1) Describe the writing project you found meaningful. (2) What made that project meaningful for you?"

While we report on the totality of our study in *The Meaningful Writing Project: Learning, Teaching, and Writing in Higher Education* (Eodice, Geller, & Lerner, 2016), we focus here on one particular factor that students told us made a writing project meaningful for them, a factor we originally coded as *personal connection*, which occurred in 253 or 36% of all student survey responses. Given this prevalence, and how tangible the power of personal connection was for us as we read and reread responses from students, we believed a more granular analysis would allow us to offer deeper explanations of how and why so many students invoked personal connections in their descriptions of what made their writing projects meaningful.

In this article, we build from this subset of our research to offer a student-driven construct of what makes writing meaningful to undergraduates: Meaningful writing assignments allow students to make and extend personal connections to their experiences or history (individual/internal factors), their social relationships (social/external factors), and/or their subjects and topics for writing (a combination of individual and social factors). The power of these personal connections, we

suggest, provides a way to conceptualize the process of students' engagement with writing tasks and to offer students opportunities to enact agency. For the latter, we appreciate Williams's (2017) definition of the term: "Agency . . . is the perception, drawn from experiences and dispositions, that the individual can, in a given social context, act, make a decision, and make meaning" (p. 9). For many students, the projects they name as most meaningful offer opportunities to be agentive—that is, to make personal connections and apply them to their writing. At the same time, we need to acknowledge that those "social contexts" may constrain. As Jackson (2003) notes, "If we were to treat student agency as the single most important ingredient in the educational brew, we would have to acknowledge the power of the social forces each student must contend with" (p. 581). Nevertheless, as we discuss later in this article, our student-driven construct also suggests how "expansive framing" (Engle, Lam, Meyer, & Nix, 2012) could create possibilities for students to make personal connections to their writing, connections that lead them to feel at times as if their writing in higher education has been meaningful.

Our study confirms aspects of both Melzer (2014) and Anderson et al. (2015), but we also offer a way forward for writing instruction across disciplines that encourages us to focus less on what students cannot or have not accomplished in their texts and to continue to focus more on embracing an orientation to student writing and the processes of writing that truly capitalizes on the experiences, beliefs, and aspirations students bring to their learning. We believe that listening to what students tell us about their meaningful writing projects can inform our conceptualization of writing across the disciplines and improve our pedagogical practices in higher education.

## **Writing across the Curriculum and in the Disciplines in Higher Education**

Researchers often credit higher education's institutionalization of the teaching of writing beyond English to the writing across the curriculum (WAC) movement of the 1970s and 1980s and the lasting effects of establishing cross-disciplinary writing programs, supporting faculty across disciplines in their attempts to use writing for learning, and encouraging faculty from disciplines beyond English to research and publish studies of learning and teaching with writing (Anson, 2010; Anson & Lyles, 2011; Russell, 2002). But even with writing expectations and requirements embedded in institutions and known by various acronyms (WAC: writing across the curriculum; WID: writing in the disciplines; WEC: writing-enriched or -enhanced curriculum; WI: writing-intensive courses; CxC: communications across the curriculum), we know from studies of student writing in higher education across a wide range of institutions that "transactional" writing tasks, those assignments that require recapitulating content for a teacher-examiner reader, dominate (Burstein, Elliot, & Molloy, 2016; Melzer, 2014). We also know that writing assignments are not as varied as we might think they are (Addison & McGee, 2010), do not necessarily increase in page requirements, and often are low-stakes, making up a small percentage of students' course grades (Graves, Hyland, & Samuels, 2010).

Despite this, we do know that many college students seek more from their writing than merely transactional exchanges. For instance, throughout *Persons in Process*, Herrington and Curtis (2000) describe how the college students in their study “sought a sense of agency through the writing, a sense of both speaking for and speaking to others whose thinking, if not behavior, they might in some way affect” and “used what they knew best . . . the experiences they brought with them from home” (p. 17). Further, each student in their study “seemed intent upon making her- or himself the ‘subject’ of the composing processes in the full sense of the word” (p. 17).

Despite students’ desires to leverage personal connections, writing instruction in higher education has often neglected potential goals for writing beyond the transactional. As Russell (2002) has said of the history of writing in the academic disciplines, “From very early in the history of mass education, writing was primarily thought of as a way to examine students, not to teach them, as a means of demonstrating knowledge rather than of acquiring it” (pp. 5–6). Lillis’s (2001) conclusion from her study of adult women writers in higher education (HE) in the United Kingdom is particularly cautionary: “It is difficult to get close to individual desires for meaning making within the context of the culture of HE: student-writers’ efforts are inevitably channeled into working out what is acceptable within HE, rather than exploring what they might want to mean” (p. 162).

In addition, writing instruction in higher education broadly retains a firm focus on the mastery of academic discourse, whether in required first-year writing or in disciplinary writing courses. WAC/WID literature moves the focus to mastery of varied genres, but in most cases the opportunities for students to make personal connections are constrained, and we often ignore the role students and their identities and experiences play within the larger discourse community of higher education. In Thaiss and Zawacki’s (2006) *Engaged Writers and Dynamic Disciplines*, widely read because of its attention to student and faculty experiences with writing across the disciplines and its model of institutional research and assessment of writing, we get some clues as to why faculty in higher education continue to build writing assignments with this narrow focus. Thaiss and Zawacki (2006) describe one “characteristic” of academic writing as “the dominance of reason over emotion or sensual perception” (p. 16). They acknowledge the ways scholars use “highly articulated and sensual appreciation,” “passion,” and “personal experience,” but note that in every discipline there is a move for the “responsible” scholar to “step back” from these, “almost as if he or she were a separate person, and place that emotional, highly sensual experience in a context of the relevant experiences of others and of the history of academic analysis of the topic” (Thaiss and Zawacki, 2006, p. 6). Thaiss and Zawacki (2006) explain, “With students, perhaps the most common instruction by teachers in regard to the control by reason of emotion is to avoid ‘impressionism’: merely expressing ‘feelings’ or opinions” (p. 6); they go on to note that “the ‘discipline’ of which we speak is largely this ongoing process by which scholars learn through practice to cultivate both emotion and the senses and, necessarily, to subjugate them to reason” (p. 6).

These dominant practices have been critiqued for this subjugation, a perennial construction of student writing in higher education. For example, Kells (2007) argues, “Traditional models of WAC too narrowly privilege academic discourse over other discourses and communities shaping the worlds in which our students live and work” (p. 93). In his most recent book, Guerra (2016) returns readers to LeCourt’s 1996 critique of writing across the curriculum, noting that LeCourt “called for ‘a concomitant focus on the writer’s multiple discursive positions as a way of allowing for student difference and alternative literacies to find a space within disciplinary discourses’” (p. 146). Guerra (2016) points to numerous scholars who “suggest that limiting the focus to academic discourse in a WAC program disempowers students (Flower, 2008; Goldblatt, 2007; Mathieu, 2005; Parks and Goldblatt, 2000; Weisser, 2002) because it fails to acknowledge the ‘learning incomes’ (Guerra, 2008a, p. 296) and ‘discursive resources’ (Lu, 2004, p. 28; Reiff & Barwashi, 2011, p. 312) that they bring with them from their various ‘communities of belonging’ (Kells, 2007, p. 88)” (pp. 146–147). In fact, Gere (2018) points out that students might already be writing beyond narrow existing conceptions of academic writing: “While many students learn to negotiate the genres and conventions of specific disciplines as they proceed through college, their writing also moves beyond the concepts and practices we offer because they have views and desires of their own” (p. 139). Moreover, in a recent piece, Kells (2018) suggests that a more productive starting question might be, “What are the characteristics of the discourse communities (personal, civic, and academic) that our students bring to the university?” (p. 4). Kells’s question echoes the work of other scholars who have called for recognizing students’ lives and experiences as essential components of their learning and for inclusive teaching (e.g., Ball, 1992; Behizadeh, 2014; Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2013; González, Moll, & Amanti, 2006; Moje et al., 2004; Moje, Youn, Readence, & Moore, 2000; Moss, 1994; Muhammad & Behizadeh, 2015; Poe, 2013; Richardson, 2002 Royster, 1996).

We need to add at this point that collectively we have spent many decades teaching and researching students writing in higher education. While any institutional constraints that keep students from engaging meaningfully with their writing are always frustrating, we have also seen firsthand the power of writing to offer students opportunities for agency, to engage them deeply in topics for which they have great passion. Thus, our study is not an attempt to describe in a broad way what happens to *all* students writing in higher education, but instead to understand from students’ points of view what makes writing meaningful for them and how personal connection might guide our future efforts for writing projects that span majors and disciplines, required and elective courses, from first-year writing to capstone. Ultimately, the research that we report on next is intended to inform practices in higher education in which students’ experiences, beliefs, and aspirations are recognized as interwoven.

### **Methods to Investigate Students’ Meaningful Writing**

We hoped that by asking seniors at three very different institutions to self-report their meaningful writing experiences, we would be able to describe a range of

assignments college students have actually been asked to complete, describe how students navigate the expectations of writing assignments across the disciplines, and explore the experiences, beliefs, and aspirations students bring to their writing and learning. Our qualitative, grounded-theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) relied on students describing their understanding of what made their writing experience meaningful to them and explaining to us their understanding of the components of a meaningful writing project. We offered the intention of our research to seniors on our online survey consent form in this way: *The survey is part of a research study whose purpose is to gain an understanding of the elements that college students believe make writing tasks meaningful.* The student-defined construct of *meaningful*—as it applied to their writing experiences over the course of their undergraduate careers—was arrived at through an emic approach (Lett, 1990) that was rooted in these writers' experiences and perspectives.

### ***Student Survey***

For our larger project, in the spring of 2012 we invited a total of 10,540 seniors at Northeastern University, St. John's University, and the University of Oklahoma (Northeastern = 2,414; St. John's = 1,982; Oklahoma = 6,144) to take an IRB-approved survey (see [http://meaningfulwritingproject.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/MWP\\_Consent\\_and\\_Survey.pdf](http://meaningfulwritingproject.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/MWP_Consent_and_Survey.pdf) for the complete survey). At the heart of our survey are two open-ended prompts: "(1) Describe the writing project you found meaningful. (2) What made that project meaningful for you?" We also asked students to offer information in several additional areas:

- A range of demographic information (e.g., major and minor, language proficiency, race/ethnicity, age range, GPA in major and overall).
- The class in which their meaningful writing project took place, whether that class was in the major, an elective, or a general education requirement, who the instructor of the class was, and when they were enrolled.
- Whether they had previously written anything similar to their meaningful writing projects and whether they imagined they would write similar projects in the future (with open-ended responses for each of these questions).

We closed the survey with 780 responses, or a 7.4% return rate. After removing partially completed responses, we ended up with 707 surveys, or a final return rate of 6.7%.

### ***Analyzing Student Survey Data***

Faced with a large qualitative data set, we decided to situate our analysis in responses to the "What made that project meaningful for you?" question on our student survey. These responses ranged from phrases or short sentences to fairly lengthy paragraphs. Guided by grounded theory methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), we at first broadly labeled recurrent patterns in these data, then developed a list of codes to describe and then reapply to the data (Saldaña, 2012). We went on to develop a final list of codes (see Appendix) that we then collaboratively applied (Smagorinsky, 2008, p. 401) to every one of the 707 student survey responses via

weekly videoconferences. In these sessions, we talked through our rationale for the codes we were developing and negotiated the codes to be applied. It is important to note that because of the richness of these responses, examples of which we present next in our findings, we usually applied three or four codes per response.

Near the end of this coding process, we confirmed our internal consistency by choosing a random sample of 20 survey responses and applying our codes once again. Our rate of agreement with the first round of coding was over 90%.

### **Reanalyzing the Responses Coded as *Personal Connection***

When we completed our initial coding of the survey responses, we were intrigued to find that we had assigned the *personal connection* code to more than one in three students (253 or 36% of our 707 respondents). More recently, for the purposes of this article and to learn more from what students told us about their personal connections to their meaningful writing projects, we collaboratively recoded these student survey responses, considering the “What made that project meaningful for you?” response first, and if there was not enough information in that response, turning also to the “Describe the writing project you found meaningful” response. We used the same emic approach (Lett, 1990) we had used for our first analysis of the data, reading the responses together and developing a new set of codes (see Table 1).

Once we had completed our coding and added up the most frequently occurring codes, the final step in our analysis, one completed over several months of conversation, writing, and revision, was to group the *personal connection* codes into categories. We identified three primary categories, which we describe next: *personal connections to individual or internal factors*, *personal connections to social or relational factors*, and *personal connections to subject matter or topics for writing*.

### **Students’ Descriptions of Personal Connection**

From the students’ perspective, *personal connection* does not (always, often, only) refer to personal narrative, but instead refers to connections to what and who is important in their lives, to their interests, and to their aspirations. In short, for students in our study, the personal offers opportunities to connect with their academic writing in meaningful ways. We are not setting up an argument for more “personal writing”; we are looking at the scope of ways students are or are not invited to consider personal connections to academic writing assignments that may have been, but were not necessarily intended to be, personal narratives.

What we found is that in the writing projects students named as most meaningful, they cited personal connections to three primary spheres of influence: (1) individual factors, including the ways they connected to their development as writers, their sense of authorship, their vision of future writing or identities, their desire for self-expression, and their individual experiences (46% of all responses); (2) social factors, including family, community, and peers (16% of all responses); (3) factors that we see as straddling the social and the individual, namely students’ interests in and passion for the subjects of their writing, and their sense of the



importance of those topics (26% of all responses) (see Table 1 for a summary of code frequencies and examples).

While our first analysis considered all the elements students named as contributing to the meaningfulness of their writing projects, elements ranging from accomplishment to relevance, the analysis reported here focused on a predominant code in order to uncover the possible ways students made personal connections to their writing. In order to further understand the networks of connection that students tap into, we analyzed individual units (student-generated answers to survey questions) to show the complexity of student experiences with writing that derived from personal connection, however visible or invisible that connection was within the final written product.

The student answers below exemplify the codes that evolved. Following a description of our three major findings from those data, we offer brief case studies to illustrate students' constructions of the types of personal connections they described and the ways multiple codes/multiple personal connections were often present in many students' open-ended survey responses.

**TABLE 1. Personal Connection Code Frequencies**

Personal Connection Code	% of Survey Responses	Example from Student Survey
<b>INDIVIDUAL CONNECTIONS</b>		
Development	16%	The project was meaningful because it allowed me to be more open minded and changed my perspective on many things.
Authorship	12%	I liked that I was able to choose how to respond, that I could write in the first person, and I could talk about my own experiences.
Future	8%	It allowed me to combine past life experiences with future goals and hopes in novel form.

*Continued on next page*

TABLE 1. Continued.

Self-expression	7%	The prompt was vague, there were no limitations on what I could write about, and it gave me the opportunity to express something personal.
Experience	3%	My capstone project was meaningful to me because it took experiences from my experiential learning and from my academic studies.
SOCIAL CONNECTIONS		
Family/community/others	16%	It was an opportunity to use an academic approach to share a story of Native American interest. In our traditional ways, everything is passed on in Oral tradition, but those that know our stories are passing on. In order to preserve our stories and life experiences for our future generations, it is absolutely imperative, that we take the opportunity to learn these academic strengths.
SUBJECT MATTER CONNECTIONS		
Interest/passion	18%	It was something I had spent a lot of time working on and I actually cared about the specific data and topic.
Topic importance	8%	The attack of September 11 really affected me and to reflect about the new WTC seems to be the most meaningful in all of the papers i wrote for classes.

***Finding 1—Students find writing projects meaningful when they have opportunities to connect their writing to individual factors: their development as writers, their sense of authorship, their vision of future writing or identities, their desire for self-expression, and their individual experiences (46% of all responses).***

For the student “what made the project meaningful?” survey responses that we initially coded as *personal connection*, one theme that emerged was students’ connections to a variety of internal or individual factors. We see these motivations or perceived outcomes as primarily inward-looking, as opposed to the social or relational factors we describe in Finding 2. In these instances, students were telling us that the personal connection resulted in a meaningful writing experience because of opportunities for them to grow, develop, or imagine future selves; to take on identities as writers or authors; to have a venue for self-expression; or to tap into previous experiences.

More specifically, we coded a response as *development* (16% of all responses) when the student indicated that their development as a writer, student, researcher, or person was the primary motivation and/or the effect of the meaningful writing project. In responses we coded as *authorship* (12% of all responses), students described the processes and strategies of writing and research as motivating factors, including the growth of their identities as writers. Responses that we coded as *future* (8% of all responses) described students’ future writing or future identities as primary. We coded survey responses as *self-expression* (7% of all responses) when students told us how their meaningful writing project offered an opportunity to voice an opinion or point of view or to make their voices heard. Responses coded as *experience* (3% of all responses) described the meaningfulness of the project deriving from a student’s direct experience. Overall, in this category of findings, students reflected on personal connections to their perceived growth or development as writers, learners, or persons, and described opportunities to make their voices heard, whether by expressing an opinion or writing about a previous experience. The writing or writing process gave them a sense of themselves in higher education, in their disciplines, in their current and future professions, and in the world, and helped them consider the importance of their experiences and learning.

**Case Study—Individual Connections: Future**

A finance major (female, 22–25, White/Caucasian) told us that her most meaningful writing project occurred in her “introduction to business” class, which she took in her first semester. She described the project, one written as part of a group task, as follows: “When writing a business plan for one of my classes, I had to write the mission and values for the company.” She reported that she had not previously done this type of writing.

Here’s how she described what made this project meaningful:

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.

In our first round of coding, we coded this response as *personal connection*, *app+* (application/relevancy/future/pragmatic/authentic/professionalization), and *writing to learn*. Then, as we focused on types of personal connection, we coded this response as *individual connections: future*, given this student's emphasis on the writing project as a confirmation of her career choice.

This student did tell us in response to another survey question that she imagined performing this kind of writing task after graduation:

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.

We note that the student's aspirations had a definite social function—"that moral and beneficial business practices transcend not only throughout the company itself but the community around it." She articulated, then, how she experienced her meaningful writing project as connected to both her postgraduation career plans and the impact she wanted to have on her company and community.

### **Case Study—Individual Connections: Authorship**

An English major (male, 22–25, Middle Eastern) told us his most meaningful writing project was for an independent study he completed during his junior year. He described that project as follows:

I did an independent study on Black Cinema a few semesters ago. The writing project was a seminar paper of sorts on the research that I conducted. I ended up focusing on the portrayal of sexuality in Black Cinema.

In terms of what he felt was meaningful, this student reported that

the subject matter was something that I really cared about. Part of it dealt with some of the favorite film movements, so doing the research was truly enjoyable. After viewing, discussing, and reading for an entire semester, I found that the writing was seamless. It was one of the few times in my academic career that I connected to writing like this.

In our first round of coding, we coded this response as *personal connection*, *process*, and *researching to learn*. Then, as we focused on types of personal connection, we coded this response as *individual connections: authorship*, as he described a semester-long research and writing process that he "connected to" in a way that was unfortunately rare in his undergraduate career.

This student also told us that he had not written anything similar since, but that he thought there was application to his future writing: "If and when I pursue

grad school, this can most certainly act as a writing sample (after two more drafts).” His recognition of the need for additional revision before this project could serve as a graduate school application writing sample attests to his awareness of writing and revision—gained in part, perhaps, through this project.

***Finding 2—Students find writing projects meaningful when they have opportunities to connect their writing to peers, family, and community members important to them (16% of all responses).***

Whereas Finding 1 highlighted students’ connections to internal or individual factors, a second theme that emerged was students’ connections to a variety of social influences, including family, community members, peers, and other actors. The social or relational personal connections that seniors described in their answers reinforced the commonly held view that writing and learning are social processes. For some students, the meaningful writing project was an opportunity to reflect on a relationship or even to make that relationship the subject of the project. In these responses, students told of social connections that often spanned time—reaching back into childhood or family history, connecting in the present to peer groups or communities, or reaching forward to imagined future social relations.

**Case Study—Social Connections: Family**

A mechanical engineering major (male, 22–25, White/Caucasian) wrote his meaningful project in a required technical writing class he completed in his third year of a five-year program. He described it as follows: “The project I found meaningful was a project investigating the effectiveness of modern safety and security measure for troops overseas. It was a tradeoff comparison between mobility and safety.”

While he reported that he had not previously written anything similar, past experiences and ongoing relationships in his life were what made the project meaningful: “I was an engineer for the army . . . and have had several family members in the military. It was nice to get interviews and first-hand accounts.”

In our first round of coding, we coded this response as *personal connection* and *researching to learn*. Then, as we focused on types of personal connection, we coded this response as *social connections: family*. This student told us he expected this project to contribute to his future writing, and he again invoked his past experiences: “I have been an engineer for the Army working with those who make various armor systems.”

In addition to social/family connections, in this response we see individual connections based on this student’s past personal experiences with the army, and future connections, given his career plans in mechanical engineering.

***Finding 3—Students find writing projects meaningful when they have opportunities to connect to their subjects or topics for writing (26% of all responses).***

In this category of findings, seniors told us of writing projects in which they were using their personal connections to follow an interest or passion or delve into a topic they found important, in a sense connecting to the content of their writing. As we

noted previously, these topics were not necessarily about the students themselves (although they sometimes were); instead, students' personal connections motivated or informed their inquiry, and those connections led them to find their writing meaningful. We also see these connections to subject matter as informed by both the social and the individual: students' motivations for exploring a subject could have social or relational foundations, or their interest could start with individual desire or importance. Subject matter could also be determined by the assignment itself or the course topic, an external factor interacting with what students individually brought to their writing contexts. It is in the intersection of external/internal that students in our survey reported that they found writing meaningful.

In responses we coded as *interest/passion* (18% of all responses), seniors across the disciplines used the words *interest* and *interesting* repeatedly: "It was about something I was very interested in." "It was about a topic of interest to me." "I was interested in the topic." "This assignment forced me to more deeply analyze events that were interesting to me." "It was relevant to my field of study and I was interested in the topic. I got to choose something that was interesting to me and was able to thoroughly explore the implications of the research." In some of the responses relating personal connection to content, students told us that the topic or content wasn't merely "interesting" but that it held *importance* (8% of all responses) for them, whether for their future lives or for learning something new about the subject.

### **Case Study—Subject Matter Connections: Interest/Passion**

A journalism major and English minor (female, 18–21, two or more races) completed her meaningful writing project as a senior in her topics in film genre course. She described the project and her experiences writing in college: "Honestly, I was never assigned a meaningful project until I started writing about things that interested me in a topics in film genre course. All the papers I wrote in that course were significant."

When asked to tell us what made the project(s) meaningful for her, this student reported, "They were academic papers but it was in a subject that I felt passionate about." In our first round of coding, we coded this response as *personal connection* and *affect*. Then, as we focused on types of personal connection, we coded this response as *subject matter connections: interest/passion*, given the student's description of her "passionate" connections to the subject of her film course.

While this student told us that she had not done such writing projects previously, she also was not sure she would pursue similar writing after graduation: "It might be meaningful in some odd way as most things turn out that way but as a direct correlation to journalism, I cannot say I'm a 100 percent sure it will contribute to my writing in the future, but maybe."

### **"Choice"/"Allow" and the Meaningful Writing Project**

Whether students' personal connections were to individual factors, to social factors, or to subjects or topics for writing, an element we often saw in these data was

students telling us about “opportunity” or “choice” in the writing task itself. This element of “choice” also occurred significantly more frequently in the *personal connection* data set than in the 707 responses as a whole. More specifically, in the overall set of 707 responses, we saw students mention “choice”/“allow” in nearly a third (31%) of responses. However, when we split responses we initially coded as *personal connection* from the others, as shown in Table 2, we saw that “choice”/“allow” was mentioned in 45% of *personal connection* responses, compared with 22% of all other responses, a difference that was statistically significant at  $p < .01$ .

**TABLE 2. Frequency of “Choice/Allow” in Survey Responses Coded Personal Connection Compared with All Other Survey Responses**

	Survey Responses Coded <i>Personal Connection</i>	All Other Survey Responses
“Choice”/“Allow” Mentioned	45%	22%
No Mention of “Choice”/“Allow”	55%	78%

Differences statistically significant at  $p < .01$

In other words, nearly half of the students whose survey responses we coded as *personal connection* also noted that the project included an element of choice or allowed them degrees of freedom to choose their topic or approach for writing.

Understanding that most of the assignments described by students did not overtly *assign*, ask for, or invite personal connection leads us to consider how students found a way into that assignment, found an opening to make a personal connection. As we describe next, this might be explained by the fact that students’ opportunities to write were “framed expansively” (Engle et al., 2012).

### “Expansive Framing” and Meaningful Writing via Personal Connections

The writing projects described in these case studies, like many of the writing projects students named as most meaningful, started as class assignments or required course tasks of some sort (in our survey, students did have the option of naming self-sponsored or out-of-school writing as their most meaningful, but 95% named a course-based writing task). One lens for understanding our student-driven construct of what might make writing projects meaningful for undergraduates is “expansive framing” (Engle et al., 2012) of the task. Engle and colleagues (2012), in their studies of knowledge transfer, define “expansive” and “bounded” framing as follows:

A teacher can frame a lesson as a one-time event of learning something that students are unlikely to ever use again, or as an initial discussion of an issue that students will be actively engaging with throughout their lives. Our contention is that the first kind

of framing, which we refer to as *bounded*, will tend to discourage students from later using what they learn, while the second, which we refer to as *expansive*, will tend to encourage it. (p. 217)

More expansive framing allows students to connect to certain kinds of personal resources, some of which are external or social—family and community members, friends, and peers—and some of which are internal or individual—development, authorship, future identities, self-expression, experience. Further, Engle and colleagues present expansive framing as connected to students' identities as learners within a particular social setting:

In an expansive framing of roles, learners are positioned as active participants in a learning context where they serve as authors of their own ideas and respondents to the ideas of others. Within this sort of learning environment, students' authored ideas are recognized and integrated into class discussions and other activities. (p. 218)

Of the 707 students who replied to our initial survey, 28 seniors took the time to complete the full survey, including all of the demographic information requested, just to tell us that they *did not* have any meaningful writing experiences. The room for possibility that expansive framing might offer comes into focus when we examine these responses more closely. In one sense, we see these students telling us that they felt deprived of a key educational experience—a meaningful writing experience. And in several of their explanations for what their writing experiences did *not* provide, we can see the desire for personal connections as a particularly strong force, whether those would be connections to subject matter, chances for self-expression, or opportunities for creative work.

An accounting/management information systems major (female, 22–25, Black/African American) responded:

I haven't found any of my writing projects meaningful. They were always about something that did not necessarily interest me. Most of the time my assignments included a prompt or business that I needed to write about.

And a biology major, environmental science and history minor (female, 18–21, White/Caucasian) wrote:

I can be honest and say that i haven't one writing project during my undergraduate career meaningful. As a science major I have been delegated to writing lab reports and research proposals almost exclusively. There have been no opportunities to write an opinionated, personal pieces or works of fiction.

I would have found a writing project that allowed me to express my creativity or one that allowed me to project my ideas and opinions to be meaningful. As stated, unfortunately science majors mostly write about other peoples research and rehash the opinions that are presented to them in class or textbooks.



At least in high school I was able to write fiction or essays on the topics of my choosing. Some of these were later published to submitted for essay contests, which I find brings meaning to the work if it can be shared with others.

Although not meaningful, all of the writing I have done in college is in preparation for a career as a scientists/researcher.

Of course, it is quite possible that students in the same courses with the same opportunities as these two students might have had meaningful writing experiences. That possibility attests to what we noted above: writing tasks framed as “bounded” do not rule out the possibility of meaningful writing and personal connections, but they certainly limit those possibilities. We do not know for sure if that was the case for these two students, and we acknowledge that not all writing tasks can be open-ended enough for students to have full freedom to choose their subject.

### **Meaningful Writing via Personal Connection: The Long View**

As we noted above and considering Melzer’s (2014) research, we strongly suspect that meaningful writing was an exceptional experience for the great majority of students in our study (and perhaps even more so for students who did not fill out our survey because they did not have a meaningful writing project to describe). Many faculty fear attempts at encouraging students to make personal connections will result in writing that is too self-absorbed; they worry that students will not use course content to expand their notion of who they are and what they care about if allowed to rely on what is most familiar to them; they do not want to assess or grade students’ experiences or lives (see Thaiss & Zawacki, 2006).

While the current study investigates the significance of personal connection to meaningful writing, it is impossible to totally extricate one from the other: personal connection to self, others, and subjects is likely to also be strengthened by the sense that writing tasks are relevant. When students complain that the tasks are not relevant, they have been denied “opportunities to develop their own ideas and meanings for why academic tasks are relevant to their lives, as this has a greater impact on interest and involvement as students internalize the value of the academic work at hand” (Pisarik & Whelchel, 2018, p. 32). In the same way, if the path to making a personal connection is blocked by regulatory assignments, a personal disconnect will ensue.

In a late section of their book, subtitled “Linking Private with Academic Interests,” Herrington and Curtis (2000) note that “discourse communities can function as sponsoring communities of people and discourses that help link a personal with a social identity and private with public projects. Teachers can help make that link between private and social identities by presenting students with an image of identity and possibility. Further, they can serve as sustaining, empathic audiences and mentors who affirm students and give them means to articulate and pursue their private interests in academic/public settings and texts” (p. 374). But even as they argue for the value of these practices in learning and teaching, they identify why some teachers may hesitate to use them:

Particularly in courses in the social sciences and humanities, it is our responsibility as teachers to create occasions for students to draw on their personal knowledge—if they feel it is relevant to and if they choose to do so—not as privileged knowledge to be accepted as is, but as valid knowledge to be brought into their critical and reflective thinking along with other knowledge presented in and framed by the course. What are the obstacles to doing so? Certainly, two are the epistemological and textual conventions that privilege extreme constructions of objective knower and known. But something closer to home may be operating as well, that is, some teachers' resistance to experiences and ideas that challenge their own beliefs" (pp. 378–379).

When a student tells us in our survey that "the project was meaningful for me because it allowed me to express my own thoughts without being afraid that it would affect my grade," we wonder how many students' accounts of their experiences with writing assignments would echo this one. How many other students were afraid to express their thoughts because of potential consequences to their grades? How many others did not draw on personal connection because they assumed drawing on personal resources might be inappropriate for the task? When a student told us about the opportunity to finally write about "something I was genuinely interested in," we wondered about the element of surprise embedded in that comment and how rare that opportunity might be.

Where can believing in the power of personal connection take us, and where *should* it take us next? We believe the evidence we offer here shows why—and how—our thinking should change in relation to students' possible personal connections to their writing projects across the disciplines. Over thirty years ago, Giroux and McLaren called on us to create learning experiences that allow students to "draw on and confirm those dimensions of their own histories and experiences which are deeply rooted in the surrounding community" (in Tuitt, 2003, p. 249). Devaluing personal connections can devalue whole communities of people, their experiences, and their knowledge. The most urgent, timely implications of our understanding of the power of personal connection in students' writing reiterate the need for a commitment to inclusive pedagogies (Tuitt, 2003), particularly in the face of institutional structures that often erase the value of these personal connections.

Certainly, it will be important to continue to consider *what students find meaningful* in relation to their learning and writing development, and we hope future research will explore this aspect. But even without studying learning outcomes directly, we believe the power of personal connections as described by students in our study—namely, the personal connections they make to self, others, and subjects for writing—is a key factor for developing and sustaining student agency and identity in higher education. We encourage faculty and writing researchers to continue foregrounding the complex and often hidden motivations and aspirations that students might bring to their writing and learning; doing so opens the way for students to build knowledge from their own experiences and moves educators one step closer to delivering on our promise to teach inclusively.

## APPENDIX: CODES USED TO DESCRIBE “WHAT MADE THAT PROJECT MEANINGFUL FOR YOU?”

- Accomplishment (milestone, gaining confidence)
- Affect (enjoyment, excitement, pleasant, pain, safe)
- App+ (application/relevancy/future/pragmatic/authentic/professionalization)
- Audience (awareness of rhetorical situation)
- Citation/documentation
- Collaboration
- Content learning
- Creative
- Deepen/fragmentary
- Engagement (of professor/of students)
- Failure/limitations
- Length
- Metacognition (thinking about writing process)
- New/new appreciation/new attitude
- Personal connection (incomes and prior knowledge)
- Process (describes writing or research process/sequence as meaningful)
- Resee with academic or analytical lens (from outside-of-school to in-school)
- Reflection/recognition (of turning point experience)
- Researching to learn (use of sources)
- Time/timing/timeliness
- Transfer (strategies, skills, knowledge transferred to meaningful writing project)
- Writing to learn (knowledge, skills, and process)/writing to think
- Writing to realize (something about oneself)/identity

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