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What Meaningful Writing Means for Students

By: Michele Eodice, Anne Ellen Geller and Neal Lerner

What makes a writing assignment meaningful for undergraduates? In the Meaningful Writing Project—a study of over seven hundred seniors at three universities: St. John’s University, a private, urban Catholic university; Northeastern University, a private, urban university known for experiential learning; and the University of Oklahoma, a public R1 flagship institution—students described the powerful roles that writing plays in their personal, academic, and professional lives. Our students’ stories run counter to a dominant narrative in US higher education that says students are “academically adrift” (Arum and Roksa 2011), not engaged in reading and writing in the ways that earlier generations seemed to have been. Instead, like others who deem writing to be a high-impact educational practice (Boquet and Lerner 2016; Anderson et al. 2015) and an opportunity for students to draw on and explore all dimensions of their lives (Guerra 2015), we found that students are writing across their undergraduate years, in their majors, in general education courses, in contexts without formal writing requirements, and outside of class, and they recognize that writing is meaningful.

First, we asked seniors from the class of 2012, “What was your most meaningful writing project and why was it meaningful to you?” Study participants also named the faculty who assigned their most meaningful writing projects, and we then surveyed and interviewed those faculty, asking them why they believed students found their assigned project meaningful and how writing “works” in their teaching. We want to note that student and faculty interviews were conducted by undergraduate researchers.

Our findings are grounded in students’ experiences and in their reflections on those experiences, and the findings reveal what we can learn if students’ voices become central to investigations of learning and teaching (see figure 1 for a visual representation of our major findings). In this article and in our book based on this research, *The Meaningful Writing Project: Learning, Teaching, and Writing in Higher Education* (2016), we show that meaningful writing occurs when students are invited to

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

We also found that faculty who gave writing assignments that students found meaningful often deliberately built these qualities into their teaching and curriculum.

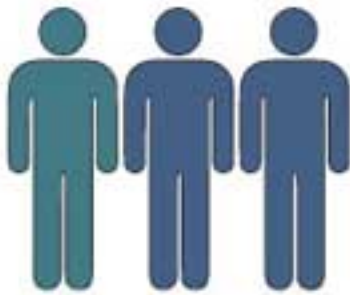
In this article, we offer examples of students’ meaningful writing, emphasizing students’ voices as they describe how and why a writing project was meaningful for them. These examples are meant to assist faculty in all disciplines who want to create the conditions for their students to have meaningful writing experiences.

Figure 1. Major Findings from the Meaningful Writing Project.

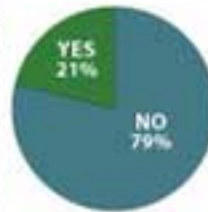
From *The Meaningful Writing Project: Learning, Teaching, and Writing in Higher Education*
(Utah State University Press, 2016)

707 surveys from seniors at 3 schools
27 one-to-one interviews with seniors
160 surveys from faculty who taught the classes in which students wrote their meaningful writing project
60 one-to-one interviews with faculty

52% wrote their MWP in their major
17% wrote their MWP in an elective course
29% wrote their MWP in a general education course
52% wrote their MWP in a required course

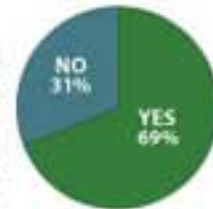


MORE THAN 1 IN 3 STUDENTS described personal connection as a reason why their project was meaningful



For the project you've described as meaningful, had you previously written anything similar?

For the project you've described as meaningful, are there ways in which this writing project might contribute to the kinds of writing you hope to do in the future?



As of 2012	CARNEGIE CLASSIFICATION	NUMBER OF UNDERGRADUATES	ANNUAL TUITION
Northeastern University	RU/H	16,385	\$37,840
St. John's University	DRU	11,390	\$33,125
University of Oklahoma	RU/VH	17,787	\$7,914



NEARLY HALF the students surveyed wrote their MWP in their senior year



28 STUDENTS went out of their way to say they had no meaningful writing as undergrads

<http://meaningfulwritingproject.net/>

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Recognizing and Valuing the Ways Students Find Meaning

A prevalent theme in our data was that writing projects are meaningful when they offer students opportunities to make personal connections to the topic, the processes, or the genre of writing. Faculty often deliberately cultivated these connections through their assignment design. As one instructor told his interviewer: “In my writing assignment the student is not forced to answer any

specific question I pose to them, but rather they are encouraged to seek connections between their own interests and the subject, and subsequently to explore said connection.”

We were struck, however, by the fact that many faculty may have never known about the connections students made. That may be because personal connection did not necessarily mean that students were writing about themselves; in fact, in many instances the topic of the writing had nothing at all to do with the writers, as in the example of one student who chose a literature review on the relationship between Vitamin D and breast cancer as her most meaningful writing project. That student told her interviewer, “I saw in the news recently vitamin D is very hot, and it’s being implicated in many diseases. . . . My aunt actually had breast cancer, so I thought I would see the role in breast cancer. It would be most interesting for me.” In this example and in the next, the writing project connected to students’ passions; their families or community members; their past, present, and future identities; or a combination of these influences.

Neha, a senior anthropology and international affairs dual major, identified herself in our survey as Asian, female, and 18–21 years old. She described her meaningful writing project as a “mini-ethnography I had to do for my Peoples and Cultures class. This was freshman year. And I was looking at hockey fan-culture.” In her interview, Neha tells the story of how she came to the project:

My friend in my dorm, she was really into hockey, and she dragged me to this hockey game early in that semester. . . . I started to like the game, and I really wanted to analyze it though, because I was still a newcomer to it. So it was sort of, kind of like an excuse to watch more hockey. But also, it was just a really cool way to analyze what people did.

While Neha’s personal connection seems at first somewhat for the sake of convenience and, simply, in the interest of spending time with her friend at hockey games, later in the interview she reveals a much deeper layer of personal connection:

It’s partly because it was an anthropology project, so I wasn’t an anthropology major when I took the class, and when I took the class it was just sort of like the pieces of my life fit together. Because I’m Indian and I grew up in an Indian household, but I went to school in a very white town, and it was sort of like a very American thing. I constantly had these clashing cultures. Or maybe not always clashing, but two different cultures, two different . . . values and things and what they expected of me. It was sometimes difficult, sometimes kind of cool. I always sort of felt like really conflicted about it, and I always felt like I had to side with one culture or the other. When I took the class, it sort of made me feel better about my life, and it was just sort of like, “Yes. This validates my life.” In a sort of way it was like I always knew that I had, there were these two different things, but it sort of just made the lines very clear. And so that’s why I switched majors. . . . It was also really cool for me to be able to look at the world through that anthropological lens, that I sort of already had because of living in two different cultures, kind of. It was really a fun experiment for me to do that.

For Neha, the meaningful writing project allowed her to confront the tension she had lived with as a person of color growing up in a majority white community. These issues of identity seem on the surface not particularly connected to an ethnography of hockey fan culture, but as Neha

reveals in these interview responses, the sense-making she was able to gain about fan culture acted as a lens for reflection on her own cultural experiences.

Neha also noted that her instructor did not play a particularly strong role in helping her craft this paper. As she described, “We knew about it from the beginning of the term, it was one of those that you do it on your own and at the end of the semester you produced the paper.” The meaning that Neha derived from the project was also not necessarily connected to her professor’s evaluation of that work. She told her student interviewer, “I got a B+ which is actually lower than I had hoped, but I still really liked it.”

The Long-Term Benefits of a Meaningful Learning Experience

We learned in our research that some faculty can become so preoccupied with their own assignment expectations that they miss the meaningful experiences students might derive. In our second case study, Steve, an “over 30-year-old” returning student working on a bachelor of science degree in natural sciences who identified himself on our survey as white/Caucasian and male, found the content of his online elective course, Literature of the American West, surprisingly engaging. He told us on our survey, “The significance of this assignment to me was that I gained a heightened appreciation for the values and philosophies of natives and pioneers of the United States.” The post-interview reflection written by the undergraduate researcher who interviewed Steve used the word “stories” seven times to describe Steve’s experience, and the interview itself includes Steve retelling the plots and themes of stories he learned in reading literature of the American West: “It’s fantastic literature. I would actually want to spend more time, take another course, [and] another degree program. Sign me up! . . . It was inspiring. It was absolutely the stories.” Steve was so moved by an Amy Tan story in the course anthology he “ran to the library” to find *The Joy Luck Club*: “I read it. The whole book. She’s an incredible writer. She spoke at the museum and I took my textbook with me and I got her autograph. I had her sign that chapter in the book.”

There is, however, a caveat to “meaningfulness” that Steve mentions in both his initial survey responses and in more detail during the interview. As Steve described it, “No matter what, I just apparently wasn’t able to conform to the professor’s style requirements.” Apparently, Steve, who was used to APA documentation, could never perfect MLA documentation and believes his B grade for the assignment was due to that failing. Even the undergraduate researcher, in her post-interview reflection, noted that “it seemed like the most frustrating aspect to him was the professor focused too much on style rather than content.”

While Steve and his instructor never met face-to-face, Steve seems to have had a rich experience with the material and found the writing assignments clear and open enough that he could explore this new literature even more deeply by writing about it. But the professor’s rigid assessment criteria left Steve feeling as if his professor did not understand how meaningful the course had been for him.

Designing Writing Projects to Be More Expansive, Inviting, and Future-Oriented

While our previous two case studies might be read as students finding meaning in their writing *despite* the actions of their instructors, in our next case the student and his instructor co-constructed the meaningful experience as an opportunity to practice writing for future application. This future orientation was a strong finding in our data as nearly 70 percent of all students surveyed felt that the projects they identified as their most meaningful would contribute to their future writing. Many faculty were quite aware of their students' goals, as one told us, "While [the assignment] is very structured, it allows the student to tap into their altruistic passions to change their world." Faculty also hoped students would experience what writing might be like in future settings: "The assignment has real-world applications that ensure that students will be able to use it in their careers as well as in the classroom."

Erik, a senior finance major who identified himself as Asian, male, and 18–21 years old, described his most meaningful writing project as an exercise in "analyzing the impact of business ethics in today's economy and society." That project, written in a required business ethics class he took as a sophomore, was meaningful to him because of its "relevance to today's ethically volatile and corrupted business practices," and he said he had never written anything like it before. As a senior completing our survey, he looked back on that project for how it still connected to one of his future goals: "I intend to contribute to the *Journal of Business Ethics* looking into privacy and social implications in the development of technology and business information systems."

Erik met with his professor more than ten times during the semester—sometimes right after class and sometimes in the early morning. The student interviewer asked him what the professor did or said in their meetings that helped him see this project through. Erik replied, "He saw my vision, he saw what I was capable of. He asked 'Why? Why are you thinking that?'"

After an "all-nighter" of marathon drafting, Erik was left with twenty pages his professor asked him to revise down to five pages. He told his interviewer, "I've never really had to support my ideas within such a rigid structure, so that was unique, having a framework around my writing." He continued, saying, "The ability to take the piece apart and analyze it and put it back together and see what was there and what was not there. I think that analytical piece and that businesslike characteristic of his critiques were really important. That's what translated across all my writing pieces until today." He also told his interviewer how the work made him feel about his professor:

I didn't like him, to be honest, throughout the whole semester. . . . he pushed me more than I wanted to be pushed. But looking back, it helped me to develop as a business student and gaining a writing style that was not only influential, but really had substance in it. . . . I was more of a creative writer to begin with. Having thoughts and producing entertaining pieces or producing pieces that were analytical and thought-provoking was my nature. But just pairing that style and that passion up with something that was so business centric, that was just an amazing journey.

When the undergraduate interviewer asked Erik what he believes makes a writing project meaningful, he said, "What makes papers meaningful to me is the [professor's] ability to present a growth opportunity for a student."

The Future for Meaningful Writing

We have shown in this article that students find writing projects meaningful when they have opportunities to connect on a personal level, to find meaning beyond the specifics of the assignment itself, and to imagine future selves or future writing identities connected to their goals and interests. We are encouraged by the evidence that the assignments faculty created often provided deliberate opportunities for meaningful learning, unlike Melzer's (2014) findings that writing assignments across the curriculum are largely relatively brief written responses in exam contexts with the instructor as the sole intended audience.

Overall, we believe what we found in our research is not complicated, but it is also not a simple equation or easy recipe. Meaningful writing happens for a reason, with intentions toward learning coming from both students and faculty, built on a platform that makes writing agentic, relevant, and consequential. Meaning does not reside in students alone or assignments alone but is found at a nexus of opportunities. The kinds of assignments or opportunities offered to students recognize writing as a social act and take place in a socially influenced environment much larger than the assignment. That environment was framed expansively (Engle et al. 2012), optimizing all the points of connection between a student and their opportunity to write. Ultimately, we believe meaningful writing projects reveal how learning, teaching, and writing can become simultaneously more connected to our goals as educators and more connected to students' own goals as learners.

Acknowledgment

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