

Meaningful Writing at Quinnipiac: A Discussion with Students and Faculty

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In November 2016, the Quinnipiac University Learning Commons and Writing Across the Curriculum program co-sponsored the 6th Biennial International Critical Thinking and Writing Conference—*Creative Connectivity: Thinking, Writing and the Translation of Information to Understanding*. The three of us, co-directors of the Meaningful Writing Project (<http://meaningfulwritingproject.net/>), were invited to offer the keynote address. In addition, we developed an interactive program for the conference's Friday Evening Conversation. Following protocols developed for the Meaningful Writing Project, Holly Bissett, a 2016 Quinnipiac graduate and current Master of Arts in Teaching student, facilitated live interviews with Quinnipiac students and faculty who agreed to share their experiences with writing. The students' majors included biology, education, and engineering; their complementary faculty members teach biology, education, and first-year writing. The live event was recorded, and we were provided with a transcript.

First, some context about the Meaningful Writing Project: We began our research to understand when and why undergraduates find writing projects meaningful. To this end, we issued surveys inviting students to describe their meaningful writing experiences and received responses from over 700 seniors from the class of 2012, across our three very different institutions—a private, urban Catholic university (undergraduate enrollment: 14,000); a private, urban university known for experiential learning (undergraduate enrollment: 15,600); and a public R1 institution (undergraduate enrollment: 20,000). We then did follow-up interviews with 27 of those students. We also received survey responses from 160 faculty students named as having taught courses in which their meaningful writing projects occurred, and we conducted interviews with 60 of those faculty.

In our book based on this research, *The Meaningful Writing Project: Learning, Teaching, and Writing in Higher Education* (Eodice, Geller, & Lerner, 2016), we showed that students described the ways meaningful writing projects from different disciplines invited them to tap into the power of personal connection; immerse themselves in what they were thinking, writing, and researching; experience what they were writing as applicable and relevant to the real world; and imagine their future selves. We found that meaningful writing projects offer students opportunities for agency; for engagement with instructors, peers, and materials; and for learning that connects to previous experiences and passions and to future aspirations and identities. Faculty who taught courses in which meaningful writing took

place often deliberately build these qualities into their teaching and curriculum, expressing their goals and values for writing through specific practices.

In what follows, we use the analytical tools developed for the Meaningful Writing Project to read the transcript of the Friday night event at Quinnipiac. We found the Quinnipiac students' experiences of their most meaningful writing align with our findings from our original data set. More specifically, in the Friday night session, students and faculty described writing 1) as a means of learning/observing, often through informal writing tasks, 2) as a means of reflection on experience, and 3) as a way of engaging with faculty and content. We provide excerpts from the event, along with our comments to show these three themes in action.

The event started with local host, Paul Pasquaretta, Director of Quinnipiac's Research and Writing Institute, offering some context:

It's been my observation that at these sorts of conferences, students are often spoken about but rarely heard from. So tonight we're very excited to bring some student voices into the forefront of our discussion. And we'll explain a bit more in a second. But we found the students first and they recommended the faculty. And it was because the students were asking the faculty, that the faculty are here today.

Anne Ellen Geller then provided some background on the Meaningful Writing Project's research methods:

The way we interviewed students and faculty who talked with us was with an undergraduate research team. So undergraduates at each of our institutions did all of the interviews with seniors in the spring of 2012. And then in the spring of 2014, undergraduates joined us to do interviews with faculty. And so we wanted to recreate a little bit of that experience for you here.

The other thing we think is really great about tonight, as Paul was saying, is we so often don't hear from students or from faculty, from their own experiences, in forums like this. And this is really an amazing sort of inside view to writing at Quinnipiac.

The first Quinnipiac student to take the mic was Jake Cyr, who was a transfer student from St. Gerard University and a software engineering major, pre-medical studies minor. Jake encountered a surprising and welcome approach to writing in Professor Fitzgerald's first-year writing course, English 101:

I think the whole process was the most influential on my writing because it wasn't directly graded right away [but] until the end of the semester. It was kind of more open and let me write exactly how I wanted to without worrying about how the teacher was going to grade me.

Jake also observes that a "two-way conversation" with his instructor fundamentally changed the typical and expected faculty-student relationship. Jake cites the freedom and flexibility of Prof. Fitzgerald's tasks as key to that engagement:

She [Prof. Fitzgerald] really helped promote openness in writing—however you wanted to. And then she would give you feedback and help you develop your argument. And it really helped.

Interestingly, we learn little about the writing itself from Jake; the context of the assignment, the practices, and the interaction take priority in his naming of a meaningful writing project. In a sense, Jake shows how writing often characterized as “low stakes” might have powerful meaning for students.

Prof. Fitzgerald confirms this idea, when she describes how her empathy for students and her years of experience with school-based writing contributed to her view on grading:

As I started to go through the process, and I was equally as frustrated, I think, as the students were, I started to realize that there was so much value in not having grades. Like all of a sudden it really was about the writing and it wasn't about the grades. And I got more meaningful writing from those students who were not so obsessed with what's the right answer, how do I get to the right answer? And I just kept saying to them, “There is no right answer. You know, it's how you perceive, it's the lens you use to look at the world. And it's the contribution you're going to make based on your writing.” And I think when they started to focus on that and less on the grades, I think it became more meaningful.

When describing her own meaningful writing project, Prof. Fitzgerald reasserts how being grade-driven can get in the way of learning.

I always prided myself on being a good writer. And I took this one professor, and I had written this paper that I was very proud of, and he gave it back to me, and he loved the red pen. It was like old school. So it was all marked up with red pen, and I panicked when I saw it. Clearly, he didn't know my background, that I was really good at this.

So I went through [the paper], and I went to see him in his office hours, and he was like (I'm five-foot so to me he was huge. He was a big guy. And he sat back in his chair), “So you think you're good at this, do you?” And I was like, “Yeah I got the grades to show I'm good at it.” So we went through the paper, and at the end of the grading, he's like, “You're so much more than what you wrote on this paper.” And I was like, wow, I had cursed you all the way over here and now I'm like, you're right, I am more than this.

And I went back and I wrote. And I think, he was the first person that actually challenged me to be better than I was. And that's what I hope I do for all my students when they write. Is that there's so much in you. And you can get the “A,” you can pass the course. But is that the best you can be? And . . . really internally you got to decide that. I can't decide for you. As I always kid around, I get paid whether you pass or not.

Jake also sees his English 101 experience as influential for the writing he would do in

later courses:

I think it definitely helped me start being better at writing. Going into biology with bio lab, we had to do a lot of lab reports. Use really precise writing. And use a lot of less ambiguous writing. It definitely helped me in that, and then also in software engineering where you have to write, [according to] really detailed requirements, documents and you have to make sure projects go . . . that way. Definitely helped me in my future career.

While one might be surprised to see a direct line from informal writing in English 101 to the specific genres of software engineering, Jake notes that the course “helped me develop my own style,” which created a foundation for the writing he would subsequently do.

The next student and faculty pair were Ryan Dombrowski and Professor Cindy Kern, and they also stress the importance of informal writing, primarily reflection on experience. First, Ryan:

I have my undergraduate degree in biology and . . . I'm currently in my fifth year, [my] graduate year for secondary education.

Ryan describes informal writing strategies he learned that could be applicable in other situations. In the process of observing, reflecting, and considering future uses, he was trying new ideas for teacher preparation:

Professor Kern's class was entitled "Secondary Field Study." The premise of the class was all secondary education—kids spend 20-plus hours in [an] area school. A couple hours a week we were sort of observers, teacher assistants. We weren't really conducting lessons until maybe the end of the semester. But it was more of a teacher assistant observer role. . . . Professor Kern taught us a new way to take notes. (So it was a more informal writing style.) I still do to this day. . . . I'd say in her course there was not a whole lot of formal writing. But I think taking that style of notes, in terms of strategies—reflecting on what you're seeing in students—is a good practice for a future teacher in terms of lesson planning, in terms of reflecting on your own go-to style.

So you're really not only just observing, but you're sort of internalizing the meeting into your future teaching. So I think that was probably the most meaningful thing in my education studies in terms of undergraduate writing.

Prof. Kern acknowledges the value of formal writing but believes part of her responsibility is

to help [students] understand how to not only be metacognitive in informal writing with strategies that really scaffold metacognition, but also help them better understand their personal history. So not all students, even at the senior level or at the master's level, really understand how somebody comes to know something.

In demonstrating the value of reflection, metacognitive awareness, and personal connection, Prof. Kern offers authentic opportunities for future teachers to engage as learners.

Interestingly, both student and teacher recognized the limitations of informal writing when there are no clear guidelines or expectations. In these cases, even digital writing becomes “busy work”—as Ryan notes. His voiced reflection below indicates how much he has already moved into the teaching role of his future:

Take the online blog technique, where you have a prompt or maybe you're just reflecting on your own—you're putting it into a little blog and you're sending it to Blackboard or whatever platform you use. I think that's important, but I feel, as a student, and I'm sure other students would agree with this, [that] it tends to be forced. It tends to be, I'm just going to tell the professor what they want to hear and then I'm going to respond to two classmates, and I'm going to say, "Oh I really like that point, that's awesome." And there's really not that level of reflection that's supposed to happen that professors want to happen. So I think that the blog, sort of [as a] weekly response to a reading or to a discussion, could be overused if there's not a useful prompt, number one, and number two, especially if those blogs are not brought into the classroom. I think there's a huge disconnect. So that's just one technique I've seen used in courses that I don't think works too effectively.

In describing her own meaningful writing project, Prof. Kern tells a personal story of how writing to learn became a “survival strategy”:

I will tell you that probably the most meaningful writing experience I had actually came when I met my husband. Because he actually introduced me to writing to learn. Not just writing, like I literally was just trying to get through assignments as an undergrad. I was just trying to survive. And my husband's actually a high school English teacher now. But he provided me with a structure that meant something to me. And it probably carried me through my master's, and then I probably didn't develop my writing until my master's degree, where it was my style, and then my doctoral program is where it became more my voice. So I don't think I did much meaningful writing before my master's degree.

Prof. Kern's values and beliefs about writing and writers are founded on negative experiences, on things she wished she had known. It is clear in her current pedagogy that she wants students to have a very different experience.

I wish I knew that writing is supposed to provide an opportunity for growth. It's not just a letter grade or it's not just an end product. I also wish I would have known earlier that it's really about us. . . . I always thought of writing as just me demonstrating understanding to somebody else instead of recognition that it was a strategy or a method for me to learn something myself. So back to the epistemology, like writing as a tool or a way of knowing or a way of showing what you know. It holds value in both realms. So I think that that

would have helped me be a better writer younger.

The final paired dialogue of the evening was with Coral Freeman, a biology major and philosophy minor, and Professor Dennis Richardson. Coral tells the audience about her collaboration with Prof. Richardson, which developed through a shared interest in parasitic organisms:

I've gotten to know [Prof. Richardson] and his parasites pretty well in the last two years. We do independent research together with nematodes and gregarines and all of the beautiful little things that no one else knows about.

Coral recounts the origins of this relationship:

I actually had to take a year off for medical leave. So I came back for my sophomore year a year late. And during that year I struggled greatly with physics, and because of that I ended up taking Dr. Richardson's class. Which was fate. And in his class, it was really interesting. I took invertebrate zoology with him. So that's just the study of animals without backbones essentially. And I wasn't expecting to have such a high integration of our writing styles in that class. And that actually someone truly cared about the way that we wrote, and it wasn't just, "okay you're a biology student, you need to write concise. You need to be straight to the point, scientific. You just say what you need to say and no fluff." That's what we were always told.

But in his class, in one of our projects—it was our poster project—he went sentence by sentence with us and actually helped us work [it] out. He's like, "I think this is a really great approach," because you know students, they need to know that this is the level of work that needs to go in. And you know, we had revised and revised and revised this poster on our own. And we could only get so far. And by having Dr. Richardson look at it, and having someone who's, you know, had so many more years of experience in writing, and scientific writing specifically, I thought it was amazing. And I thought it was necessary, and I thought more people should be doing work like this.

Their collaboration has resulted in publication, and Coral remarks that her engagement with both the professor and the content revealed the importance of passion to motivate research as well as revision to improve the products of research.

For Prof. Richardson, these kinds of interactions with students exemplify the ideals of the academy:

I've always viewed teaching in these classes as the true university model. The academy in the old sense. We are a community of learners. And Coral and I, when we're working together, it's not so much teacher/student, but it's two people who are learning together. We're scholars. We're examining things.

I have independent study students, like Coral, who come out of those projects. They have the passion for specific projects, and at that point, it's really truly no longer student/teacher. At that point, we are true collaborators.

(I really believe in the academy in its most fundamental sense.) And at that point, she knows more about the subject material than I do because she's doing the research. And we literally sit down together, and we write the papers. I've written dozens and dozens and dozens of papers that have been published in peer-reviewed journals. So I know a little bit about it. And she's a good writer. And you know, we just sit down together and we work, literally, together. It's a purely collaborative process.

Prof. Richardson also recognizes how igniting passion and agency can drive inquiry. In his description of his own meaningful writing project, he shares some truths:

My senior year, I had to do a wildlife management plan for the campus for both species, and I did an independent study working on a census of an alligator population in a swamp nearby. And those were by far the most meaningful because they involved original research. Don't mean to be disappointing but it's really not about the writing. The writing's a vehicle. It's the research that really excites us. Unless you can clearly articulate your findings in a meaningful way, it doesn't really matter.

Looking back to her first-year writing course, Coral contrasts that experience to her current, positive connection to writing and research:

I had English freshman year, I don't really remember it all that well. So it couldn't have been very meaningful. And you know, that was more like the grammar and writing to learn and things like that.

Coral's self-assessment of the process shows she cannot separate her passion for the research subject from her passion to communicate her research to others. In our view, this marks a moment of identity development as well.

And if you make every sentence matter, you're going to be so much more proud of your work. And you can want to describe it to someone else. I go home and I talk about cockroach parasites with my family. But, and I don't care, it's the passion and the writing and the way that we are able to express ourselves, and whether that is in the writing or if it's in a discussion forum or, you know, however you take it. Every single part matters. Every sentence matters. Every word matters. And that's what's important, that's what I had to take out of it as, you know, a twenty-year-old in college. You think you would have learned that sooner.

To sum up, we offer three observations: First, each of these faculty practiced *engagement*—the interaction they had with students—to the point of writing with students, co-authoring, mentoring, and providing time in class for hands-on writing work/poster development in proximity to teacher guidance and feedback. We applaud this high level of interaction, and these meaningful writing experiences offer concrete goals for other faculty to aspire to. Second, for the students in this conversation, writing-to-learn activities—low

stakes, informal and non-graded products—had tangible and lasting value. Learning about and practicing writing, without the shadow cast by evaluation, seems to be quite magical, a unicorn of a pedagogy perhaps contributing to meaningfulness in ways not seen previously. Third, students were all excited about what they got out of their most meaningful writing projects, but what is also enduring are the relationships they had the opportunity to create with their faculty through writing, and the ways this writing and those relationships are carrying over to their academic and professional lives, present and future.

We have learned in our research—confirmed by this Friday night conversation with Quinnipiac students and their faculty—that writing is central to students’ identity construction, both as a process for that construction and as a specific set of practices with which they see themselves engaging in the future. For Jake, Ryan, and Coral meaningful writing occurred at the intersection of their academic passions, their relationships with faculty, and their future aspirations. We saw this coming together repeatedly in our research on students’ most meaningful writing projects, an affirmation that writing matters.

Clearly, these three students’ meaningful writing experiences reveal their relationships to disciplinary practices and processes and their reflection on those practices and processes—important components of critical thinking. The faculty who offered these educational opportunities displayed metacognitive awareness of processes and articulated the value of the artifacts created as specific curricular goals. However, what we learned in our research were the many ways that students’ identities—as learners, as community and family members, as emerging members of a discipline—are key to meaningful writing. Why might it be that pedagogy addressing critical thinking rarely—if ever—considers student identity? If critical thinking is largely concerned with negotiating meaning, might writing opportunities that are meaningful to students be important to their development as critical thinkers?

Reference

Eodice, M., Geller, A. E., & Lerner, N. *The meaningful writing project: Learning, teaching and writing in higher education*. Logan: Utah State University Press, 2016.