

# What We Mean When We Say “Meaningful” Writing: A Review of *The Meaningful Writing Project*

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Eodice, Michele, Anne Ellen Geller, and Neal Lerner. *The Meaningful Writing Project: Learning, Teaching and Writing in Higher Education*. UP Colorado, 2017. (\$22.95; 170 pp., paperback)

One of the difficulties of research into student experience is that it tends to focus on faculty and administration perceptions of student experience. In *The Meaningful Writing Project*, Michele Eodice, Anne Ellen Geller, and Neal Lerner follow Richard Haswell's (2005) recommendations for replicable, aggregable, and data-supported research in their study on *student* perceptions of meaningful writing. The focus on empirical writing research is not surprising, considering Lerner's classic assessment apologia "Counting Beans and Making Beans Count" (1997) and follow-up adjustment "Choosing Beans Wisely" (2001), but perhaps this empirical focus is tempered by the kind of practice-based pragmatism found in Eodice and Geller's *The Everyday Writing Center* (2007) or their recent anthology, *Working with Faculty Writers* (2013).

The resulting book-length study is both approachable and methodologically attractive. *The Meaningful Writing Project* begins with plenty of methodological discussion, then takes a graphic interlude to present the methods, sites, and results in infographic form. After the infographic section, the authors discuss three key terms in a chapter each: *agency*, *engagement*, and *learning for transfer*. Each of these chapters includes a review of the literature, findings from the Meaningful Writing Project (and, when applicable, other studies), and a case study of a representative student. These three student-centered chapters are followed by a chapter on the instructors behind those meaningful writing projects. Finally, the last chapter presents conclusions and applications for stakeholders across the university.

The study is based primarily on asking seniors to "Think of a writing project from your undergraduate career up to this point that was meaningful for you" (p. 148) and then answer a series of questions about those meaningful writing projects. They and their undergraduate and graduate research assistants next interviewed twenty-seven of the students, asking them to elaborate about their projects, the classes where those projects occurred, and their writing more generally (pp. 154–55). To correlate their findings, the researchers also interviewed sixty of the instructors who assigned the

meaningful projects. The researchers are conscious about the differences between their institutions. The University of Oklahoma, rural and public, with an eighty-one percent acceptance rate, looks very different than Northwestern University, urban, private, and seventy-six percent white, and from St. John's University, Catholic, highly diverse and with a third fewer undergraduate students than the other sites. The differences between these sites foreshadow the variety the researchers discovered in what kind of projects are deemed meaningful.

### **What the Authors Did Not Find**

The researchers were expecting to find clear patterns of who assigned meaningful writing projects and where. Instead they found that the meaningful projects were scattered across “nearly five hundred faculty . . . most named only once” (p. 109). Some of the instructors were veterans, some were novices, some were full professors, some were lecturers, and some were adjuncts.

There was also no pattern on *where* these projects were taking place. Meaningful writing projects occurred in big classes and small, required courses and capstones, and in no courses at all (pp. 130–31). Some of the projects took place in online classes, when an instructor and student had “never met face to face” (p. 128). Nearly half of the reported meaningful writing projects occurred during the students' senior year (and a quarter in their junior year), but roughly ten percent occurred in freshman, sophomore, and “middler” years (p. 30). It's possible these numbers are depressed because seniors may have an easier time recalling recent assignments. All of this variety is itself enlightening—it breaks down some of the assumptions faculty may have about what kinds of classrooms and instructors lead to “meaningful writing”—but the study also provides insights into what these various projects all have in common.

### **What the Authors Did Find**

While there were not definitive patterns in where, when, or by whom these meaningful projects were assigned, the researchers did discover some unifying characteristics. These characteristics include some of the key terms in composition scholarship.

For instance, in the chapter on “Agency and the Meaningful Writing Project,” the authors draw on Marilyn M. Cooper (2011) and Shari Stenberg (2015) to define agency as “a result of social interactions among instructors, peers, and subject matter . . . infused with power and authority” (p. 34). In a case study on agency, student Leah claims, “I get very frustrated with writing” (p. 47), but she valued a writing project that allowed her to exercise her agency. That term, “allow,” was frequently used by students, but not in opposition to being “required” or “forced”—in fact, the terms were often used to describe the same writing project (p. 38). Because of this, the authors do not suggest that it is enough to write an assignment prompt that lets students write

anything on any topic. Students, especially while writing in unfamiliar disciplines, may lack the necessary content knowledge and falter, unable to come up with a meaningful area of research. The findings of *The Meaningful Writing Project* encourage a “balance between *allow* and *require*” (p. 48).

Agency, the authors argue, is an outcome, but “engagement is a process” (p. 55). Social engagement may include practices like peer review, but it can also be engagement with content, or students’ future selves. Some students said their projects were meaningful because they were able to publish or present their work, but other students found other measures of accomplishment, such as doing a lot of work or writing in a foreign language (p. 64).

Writing for transfer of knowledge and skills was strongly linked to making personal connections. More than one in three of the students from the survey mentioned “personal connection” as the reason why the assignment was meaningful (p. 31, 85). These personal connections sometimes draw on prior experiences and interests, like a project that allowed one student to research and write about an injury that had killed a high school friend (p. 87). Other projects look to the future of the student. Almost seventy percent of the students in the study said that the meaningful writing project was related to what they expect to do in the future, usually in prospective jobs (p. 41). They said things like “As a teacher, I must write lesson plans that are creative,” and “As a career artist I . . . must be able to write about my work when I submit it to juried exhibitions” (p. 41). Recognizing connections to their future lives invigorates writing for these students and clarifies the connections between their past, present, and future. As the authors put it, the meaningful projects were “holistic—not merely about content or genre or process but also about mind and body, heart and head—and to act as a kind of mirror in which students see their pasts and futures, enabling them to map those on to their writing projects to make meaning” (p. 107). It’s not overstating to characterize these meaningful writing projects as meaningful experiences—period.

## What Readers Will Find

There are a few shortcomings in this otherwise landmark study. One is whether the description of what students find meaningful naturally leads to a prescription of the kind of assignments instructors should design. Some readers may wonder if designing assignments with “personal connection” might not feed into an unhealthy narcissism, where students expect every assignment to be about *their* past and *their* future careers instead of encouraging them to look outward to people and phenomena around them.

Additionally, the school-writing focus of the study may hamper the results. This study may highlight the variety of meaningful writing projects that can occur within universities of all stripes, but it is handicapped by a focus on formal, in-class writing

assignments. It is difficult to ask seniors in a school setting about “a meaningful writing project from [their] undergraduate career” (p. 148) without those seniors reading the prompt as implying a *school* project.

The authors mention that some of the meaningful writing projects took place without classrooms, teachers, or grades (p. 131), but there’s not much discussion of those projects, because very few of the participants chose to respond to the question in that way. A full ninety-four percent of the participant seniors responded to the prompt with an in-class writing project (p. 108). This is hardly the authors’ preference, and they express disappointment that more students didn’t mention out-of-class writing, including transitional work-writing. The context of the survey (sent to students’ school email, with an informed consent letter from their school’s IRB, and beginning with a series of questions about their major, minor, and college) could play a large part in participants answering the question in relation to their classwork, as could the wording: “undergraduate career” implies school assignments more strongly than “over the last five years” and a “writing project” is not the phrase one uses to describe one’s movie review channel on YouTube or application essay for medical school.

These concerns pale in comparison to the incredible work this project does, not only in its conclusions, but also in its student-centered research methods. *The Meaningful Writing Project* is a book well-structured for a WPA-led faculty and staff book club, particularly for WAC/WID coordinators who want to focus on improving writing assignments. It is written in a way accessible to the lay reader, with plenty of representation of student voices. One of the most satisfying and accessible sections is the robust “infographic” section at the beginning of the text. The infographic section includes conclusions-at-a-glance, helpful for any book club member who might not have done *all* of the assigned reading. The ecumenical conclusions and examples demonstrate that any kind of instructor, in any discipline, teaching any kind of class can create meaningful writing experiences.

The last chapter includes practical and reflective suggestions for instructors who wish to design more meaningful assignments, assignments that provide for agency and personal connection and encourage transfer to future writing tasks, but faculty aren’t the only audience for these suggestions. Because all three of the researchers are also committed to writing center research, writing center consultants and other tutors are also addressed, as the authors recommend moving questions away from “Do you think this is meeting your professor’s assignment?” towards “What is your professor hoping you will learn and do in this assignment and what are you hoping to learn and do?” (p. 139). By focusing all members of the university writing community on connection and transfer, the authors encourage a full, holistic approach to develop not just meaningful writing projects, but meaningful writing experiences.

The researchers of *The Meaningful Writing Project* suggest that instructors have been too cavalier about writing assignments' impact on students. "We (faculty, tutors, and mentors) have likely been underestimating our potential influence on student agency, engagement, and learning for transfer; you might assign that same project every semester, but to the students it is a one-time experience" (p. 135). Reframing assignment design as giving each student a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to do a meaningful writing project can impart faculty with a greater sense of meaning in their own work. More research in writing studies should follow the example of *The Meaningful Writing Project*, laying aside our teacher-based assumptions and instead reaching out to a wide variety of students to discover insights into their college experience, which, compared to ours, is both formative and fleeting.

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