

The Meaningful Writing Project: Learning, Teaching, and Writing in Higher Education, by Michele Eodice, Anne Ellen Geller, and Neal Lerner. Logan: Utah State UP, 2016. 176 pp.

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In my various past and present roles teaching service-learning courses, supporting an institutional transition to new writing-across-the curriculum course outcomes, and directing a writing center, I have always been interested to know more about “what matters” in writing assignments and instruction. Thus I was eager to read Michele Eodice, Anne Ellen Geller, and Neal Lerner’s *The Meaningful Writing Project: Learning, Teaching, and Writing in Higher Education*.

As the title suggests, the book sets out to answer the question, “What does it mean for writing to be meaningful?” Based on results of a four-year study conducted across the authors’ home institutions—University of Oklahoma, St. John’s University, and Northeastern University—and including senior student survey responses (707) and interviews (27) as well as faculty surveys (160) and interviews (60), the book explores “meaningful” writing assignments primarily from a student-centered learning standpoint. It contributes to ongoing conversations in composition studies by providing new evidence to support arguments for best practices in composition, by challenging emerging notions of transfer, and by arguing for the importance of “expansive” learning opportunities (cf. Engle et al.) in the undergraduate curriculum. While other readers may find many different sections of this book compelling, I am drawn to the book’s claim that meaningful writing is often related to an instructor’s balance between choice and restriction, to its brief comparison of the authors’ results to National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) data, and to the fascinating, small set of student participants who completed the survey primarily to say that they had never completed a meaningful writing project. As I think about how to engage colleagues across the curriculum in discussions about the kinds of writing projects they assign, these moments in the text seem likely to promote rich discussion.

The first chapter of the book situates this text among other book-length explorations of student writing (including books by Anne Beaufort; Lee Ann Carroll; Anne Herrington and Marcia Curtis; Nancy Sommers and Laura Saltz; Marilyn Sternglass; Rebecca Nowacek; and Dan Melzer), adding new breadth to the types of institutions and students represented in these previous works. An important goal of their project is to push back against a “narrative of crisis” (5) that frames college students as largely unprepared for college and for the dim employment prospects beyond. Eodice, Geller, and Lerner view that narrative

as inadequately acknowledging the knowledge, experiences, and meanings that students bring to texts they create. Like Juan Guerra, Elizabeth Moje et al., and Kevin Roozen, the authors prefer to explore the richness—rather than the deficits—of students’ prior experiences. The authors acknowledge the methodological complexities of their approach, which includes cross-institutional IRB processes, low participant response rates (just 7.4% for the survey of seniors), and poor inter-rater reliability. Despite these problems, their description of data collection and analysis is valuable reading for anyone considering the prospect of multi-site qualitative research. Ultimately, their grounded theory approach to analyzing the data guides Eodice, Geller, and Lerner to identify *agency*, *engagement*, and *learning for transfer* as key terms that drive much of the book’s structure.

As the book shifts towards key findings, chapter two addresses the various ways that agency is reflected in student descriptions of meaningful writing projects, claiming that “agency, from the perspective of students participating in our research, consists of opportunities to pursue matters they are passionate about and/or to write something relevant to a professional aspiration or future pursuit” (35). Further, their analysis suggests that such opportunities are related to instructors and the task itself; other agential actors identified through the analysis include peers, the community, content, and the students’ imagined future tasks and selves. I found it especially interesting to learn that the researchers found a co-occurrence of terms like “allowed” and “forced” in student responses. In other words, many instructors identified as assigning meaningful writing projects were characterized by participants as effectively blending freedom of choice with required components. This interpretation suggests that students view agency not as total autonomy but rather as embedded in social relationships, sometimes including the instructor as guide.

As chapter three moves away from *agency* toward the category of *engagement*, there are points of overlap between categories that make me wish for a tighter frame of analysis. Partially compensating for this categorical looseness, though, is the authors’ decision to include case studies in most chapters. These engaging and illustrative sections reveal the complexity and depth of the responses. For example, the case study at the end of chapter two describes a student whose most meaningful writing project was a business ethics paper written mostly in a twenty hour all night session for an instructor the student did not like. Examples like this one draw attention to the ways that students’ actions may not always match teachers’ hopes and intentions. Yet, in a comment that echoes a broader conclusion of their work, the authors close this chapter with the caution that, “like empowerment, agency is not something we can (or should) bestow upon students. At best, we can build optimal conditions for agency to emerge” (53).

In chapter three, as the authors describe how *engagement* serves as a process that leads into meaningful writing projects, a strength of analysis is the careful identification of engagement as a social, rather than as only internal process. Critiquing definitions of engagement anchored in individualistic terms, the chapter focuses on the engagement that students described with “instructors and peers, with future selves, and with nonhuman entities” (56) and argues that meaningful writing projects serve as a point of convergence among student, teacher, and content.

Though this chapter is somewhat less tight than the previous chapter as it tries to unite numerous codes under its broad concept of *engagement*, the authors include statistical analysis that further contrasts meaningful writing projects with students’ other writing experiences in college. Importantly, their comparison of NSSE data with a subset of their student survey responses allows Eodice, Geller, and Lerner to show that meaningful writing projects were statistically more likely to make use of composing and teaching practices that the field of composition “has put forth as ideal” (71)—practices such as informal writing, real or hypothetical audiences for writing projects, and peer review and feedback during various stages of the process. Writing program administrators might find this comparative section valuable in justifying resource and staffing goals—like faculty workloads and class sizes (see 72-73)—that are sometimes seen as extravagant or unnecessary by upper administrators. Additionally, I can envision using the graphs about writing practices, writing types, and instructor practices mentioned in meaningful writing projects (70-72) to promote dialogue among teachers across the curriculum about their approaches to writing projects.

In connecting meaningful writing and *learning for transfer*, chapter four contributes some of the book’s most interesting theoretical work. Carefully acknowledging the contemporary difficulty of defining and assessing transfer, this chapter promotes a shift in focus from *teaching* for transfer toward *learning* for transfer. For the authors, this shift encourages a more “generative, reciprocal arrangement” (97) that entrusts students with responsibility for an authorial role in their learning. Additionally, the researchers’ analysis suggests that students found writing meaningful when they were able to practice or learn something that allowed them to stretch existing knowledge or skill into new spaces—often in agentive or engaged ways that allowed students the freedom to transfer a part of themselves into their writing projects. This finding contrasts with deficit-oriented conceptions of *teaching* for transfer, according to the authors, in that “an orientation toward teaching for transfer may limit our understanding of what students actually do transfer in learning and writing” (94). I suspect many readers may find this chapter to be an important

contribution to the contemporary dialogue about transfer in composition and in learning more generally.

Focusing on *faculty* surveys and interviews, chapter five helps triangulate the claims of previous chapters. Though the researchers had initially expected students to refer to relatively few instructors of meaningful writing projects, they instead discovered nearly 500 unique faculty members named in the 700 student survey responses. While the primary contribution of this chapter is depth (in that the faculty responses substantially reinforce student views), it also discusses *explicitness* as an additional characteristic of meaningful writing experiences; teachers who were identified as assigning meaningful writing “were easily able to articulate the ways writing worked in their classes, the importance they saw for disciplinary writing, and the challenges and triumphs they faced repeatedly in their work with students” (128). Though this finding may seem unsurprising, it provides another opportunity to challenge faculty across the disciplines to explain the genre expectations of their writing assignments, and perhaps even more importantly, to unpack for students why they are asking them to do what they are doing.

In the closing chapter, this book offers some takeaway suggestions. Here the authors are careful to avoid over-extending the implications of their work and focus instead on reinforcing their major claim that meaningful writing is, ultimately, a student-centered determination:

What seems key to us is that faculty . . . set assignment parameters with enough student choice and enough encouragement of student agency that students may *choose* to take up the invitation, and, if allowed and further encouraged, will bring the power of personal connection, future relevance, and deep immersion to what they’re thinking, writing, and researching. (133)

While this conclusion is not an earth-shattering one (for example, it echoes Vincent Tinto’s distinction between student retention and student persistence), the authors’ effort to center students’ views of meaningful writing, rather than teachers’, is an important one. As I mentioned in the opening, I found one of the most interesting results of the study to be a group of 28 students who, rather than ignoring the study’s survey request, took time to explain that they had had no meaningful writing project in their undergraduate experience. While the authors suggest that these responses may thus indicate “absence of agency” (43), the responses also demonstrate the kinds of experiences that *could have been* meaningful for these students. Rather than leaving me feeling pessimistic about lost opportunity, this part of the book—and indeed the larger project overall—encourages me to rethink my own teaching

and my approaches to engaging colleagues in discussions about what matters most in the writing projects we invite our students to participate in.

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