Book Review

The Meaningful Writing Project: Learning, Teaching, and Writing in Higher Education

By Michele Eodice, Anne Ellen Geller, and Neal Lerner

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The Meaningful Writing Project: Learning, Teaching, and Writing in Higher Education approaches the craft of writing in higher education from a fresh perspective. Through surveys, interviews, and personal experiences of students at three diverse institutions, Michelle Eodice, Anne Ellen Geller, and Neal Lerner studied writing assignments that were deemed to be meaningful. The researchers then synthesized the data, seeking to determine the key factors for such successful writing assignments. For this study, “meaningful writing” was found to “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” (4).

The book opens with a detailed description of the study, including infographics that are detailed, clearly marked, and well placed. The research is organized by multiple facets so that those creating a curriculum can easily grasp the authors’ process. The authors, acknowledging the limitations of their small response base, note that they present a well-researched beginning that can deepen the conversation about meaningful writing for students and educators alike.

Discussions on agency, engagement, and learning for transfer span chapters 3, 4, and 5. The factors most

prevalent in the survey responses of both students and faculty are analyzed, discussing what they represent and their characterization by respondents. The chapter on agency explores the balance between student freedom to choose their own topics and the appropriate level of professorial guidance. Engagement, the researchers found, almost exclusively related to the students’ future career aspirations. These two factors often converged in the application of skills to future pursuits; these students could link the experiences of writing these meaningful assignments with the topics they studied and intended to pursue after graduation. As the authors note, “Thus what we often heard students describing were the ways the meaningful writing project represented a link to the past via a resonant personal connection and a bridge to the future via the applicability or relevance of the projects” (82).

Each chapter also includes compelling and informative case studies that elucidate the data via concrete examples and often include the results of student interviews. Anecdotes from the survey responses clarify and embellish the results of each facet of the three primary outcomes. The students’ own words convey possibly more information about meaningful writing assignments than the distilled results of the study alone.

The final chapter analyzes the elements of meaningful writing for both students and faculty. Their responses frequently aligned, which the researchers indicate was unexpected. As they explain, “in the view of faculty in our study, meaningful writing assignments offer opportunities for students to tap into passions and interests, to engage in writing and research processes that enable them to learn course content, and to see applicability to future writing or future careers” (113). The authors’ years of study has resulted in a useful work for anyone who wishes to connect an assignment to the greater scope of their students’ lives and provide a college experience that resonates beyond the classroom.