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THE STORY OF THE MEANINGFUL WRITING PROJECT

Imagine a campus reception. After the usual mingling, we hear the usual questions: What do you teach? What do you research? When we say we teach writing, which we do, the person asking almost always goes on the defensive: "Oh no! Don't correct my grammar!" We have each heard that remark a million times. In response we try to explain, "We aren't interested in correcting anyone's grammar. We're interested in learning about students' meaningful writing experiences." And *bam*! Whoever we are talking with begins to tell us about their own meaningful writing experience. Then we ask a simple question, the heart of our research: What made it meaningful?

We ask this question all the time, and most of our colleagues can name a meaningful writing project. Honestly, we are not surprised—those of us who now teach likely remember some of our college professors, some assignments, and some writing failures and accomplishments—and we never tire of hearing about others' meaningful writing experiences. More surprising to us has been that almost everyone who finds out we research meaningful writing, even those who don't teach, wants to tell us about a meaningful writing experience, whether they did that writing in college or high school. We believe that's because memories of our meaningful writing as students stand out from all the times we wrote projects or papers that were rote or just meeting a requirement, easily forgettable once completed. We have come to learn that meaningful writing happens, but it doesn't necessarily happen

on its own (it might, but no guarantees). Teaching for meaningful writing requires us to attend to the connections students make with faculty and classmates and topics to write about; offer students opportunities to experience writing that is consequential; and frame writing tasks expansively. If there is a downside to teaching for meaningful writing, we have not yet encountered it—other than the very real labor demands associated with asking students to write and responding meaningfully to that writing, an issue we acknowledge and take up throughout this book. But we feel we owe it to our students to ensure they have meaningful writing experiences.

The Meaningful Writing Project

All three of us—Michele, Anne, and Neal—have experienced higher education identifying (and being identified) as white and as monolingual English writers and speakers. Two of us are first-generation college students (and one of us is a second-generation college student), and all of us are the first in our families to earn doctoral degrees. Our own professional paths in higher education include working at a variety of types of institutions, public and private, small, medium, and large. We have all held (one of us until 2022 loan forgiveness) loans that supported our education. We have taught at a range of two-year and four-year colleges and universities as graduate students, full-time faculty, adjunct faculty, and full- and part-time staff. We came to know one another through professional organizations and conferences, and we completed most of our research and writing together virtually. We share a commitment to inclusive learning spaces and a firm belief that asking students to write should be an invitation to possibility. And we became increasingly interested in understanding students' experiences of meaningful writing, not in an attempt to describe in a broad way what happens to all student writers in higher education, but instead to understand—directly from students' points of view—what makes writing meaningful for them. This interest came from a realization that while teachers of writing often see themselves as student-centered or responsive

to what students need and do, our field of writing studies actually has little direct evidence from students themselves as to how and why their writing might be meaningful.

In 2012 we invited seniors at our three institutions—the University of Oklahoma, St. John's University in Queens, New York, and Northeastern University in Boston—to tell us about the most meaningful writing projects of their undergraduate years and what made those projects meaningful. More than seven hundred students offered examples of meaningful writing from required and elective, from first-year writing to capstone, and from anthropology to accounting courses. Some students described writing they completed outside of school. We report on this research in a range of publications and in our book, *The Meaningful Writing Project: Learning, Teaching, and Writing in Higher Education*,[1] but here's the short version of what we learned: Undergraduates told us that meaningful writing offers what we call "personal connection,"[2] or tangible connections to their experiences, interests, passions, communities, and families. Students also told us that often meaningful writing is relevant, applicable to the real world and to their futures. Further, meaningful writing offers students opportunities to learn about course content or develop their passion for writing about particular topics. Finally, students told us that writing can be meaningful when it offers them opportunities to conduct research and learn from that process. These primary factors that made writing meaningful for students were augmented by additional findings we found particularly intriguing:

- Nearly 80 percent of undergraduates who completed our survey told us that the project they had identified as meaningful was not something they had done previously. In other words, rather than relying on the familiar, meaningful writing was tied to new opportunities, new ways of writing, new subjects, and understanding new aspects of being a writer.
- Nearly 70 percent of undergraduates who completed our survey told us that they expected their meaningful writing projects to continue into their futures in some

way, whether they'd do similar kinds of writing post-graduation or they'd apply the content knowledge or writing knowledge gained from their projects to future endeavors.

- More than a third of students mentioned that they were "required" or "forced" to complete some aspect of their meaningful writing project (even if just to fulfill a requirement), while a slightly larger percentage described how the project "allowed" or offered opportunity for them to write what they were passionate about or to explore something new. Students want teachers to find a balance between complete freedom (e.g., "Write about anything!") and helpful constraints.

Following the 2012 research we presented what we learned at conferences, in keynote addresses, and through invited workshops with faculty at a wide variety of institutions in the United States and abroad. We started to hear from colleagues across the country who were using our work, and even replicating it on their campuses, seeking to better understand how they might best cultivate meaningful writing for their students.

By spring 2021, we wondered how much had changed for students over the previous nine years, particularly in the face of a global pandemic radically altering how we learn and teach. We once again invited seniors at our three universities to participate—this time with a revised version of our Meaningful Writing Project survey. We wanted to know more about who our students are and what role their identities play in making writing meaningful, so we asked them to tell us their pronouns, the languages they use, and their self-described racial, ethnic, and cultural identities. And we asked if and how these elements shaped their meaningful writing experiences.[3]

Much of what we found was consistent with the first phase of our research: students connected their writing to experiences, communities, and families; found the writing applicable and authentic; and appreciated opportunities to research and learn about topics they were interested in or had a passion for. A slightly lower number of students created meaningful writing

projects they had not done previously but a slightly larger number felt their meaningful writing projects would inform their future writing.

- Students in 2021 far more frequently cited "personal connection" (63 percent of all responses in 2021 versus 40 percent in 2012) and less frequently cited applicability/relevance (25 percent in 2021 versus 34 percent in 2012), as the factor that made their writing project meaningful (both statistically significant differences).
- A majority of students (64 percent) also believed that their identities played a role in making their projects meaningful.
- Not surprisingly, given the pandemic conditions starting in 2020, far more students in our 2021 survey noted their meaningful writing projects took place in online or hybrid class modes.
- Finally, in 2021, 10 percent of students told us that their meaningful writing project occurred outside of assigned coursework, slightly higher than the 6 percent who reported this in 2012.

Because we felt we had learned so much about the learning and teaching that supports meaningful writing projects, and because we continued to believe that our students could best teach us how to teach, we included a new question asking students to speak directly to the teachers and mentors who supported their writing and learning in higher education: "What would you want those teaching and mentoring in colleges and universities to know about students' meaningful writing experiences?" Hundreds of students responded. Their overall message was that anyone who teaches or mentors in educational spaces could provide more opportunities for meaningful writing to occur. This book is grounded in and shaped by what these students offered as advice to their faculty and mentors.

We tell this story of the Meaningful Writing Project for a couple of reasons: The ideas and strategies we offer in this book

come from research that has been a major part of our academic, personal, and professional lives for more than ten years. Also, students' perspectives on their learning and writing are at the center of our research, our teaching, and our histories as writing researchers, teachers, and mentors. Our extensive qualitative research and our centering of students' perspectives inform the overarching framework of this book, and we believe we can, with some confidence, say this: students will have even more meaningful writing experiences if we offer more opportunities for their writing to be meaningful for them.

We see teaching for meaningful writing as an inclusive, asset-based pedagogy that truly hears, respects, and advocates for student learners.[4] We know inclusive pedagogies alone will not counter all of the structural inequities and overt and insidious ways higher education has been—and continues to be—exclusionary.[5] But, through teaching writing, we can tell students we care about their experiences, identities, and ideas and want to encourage their agency. So many of the reasons we usually ask students to write are explicitly or implicitly deficit based. Teaching meaningful writing requires that we interrogate and understand why we ask students to write so we can move our teaching of writing to fully asset-based approaches. In the next chapter, we pose the question, "Why do we ask students to write?" guiding readers to reflect on their current practices and pedagogies within the context of the histories, theories, and debates about the teaching of writing.

Students are more than likely writing in all their courses, and they want to find their writing meaningful. Our intent in this book is to make it possible for more students to experience meaningful writing—frequently and intentionally. By learning from the student participants in our research, experienced teachers may better understand and more easily explain why some of the writing opportunities in their courses lead to meaningful writing. Those brand-new to teaching, or new to teaching with writing, may want advice on how to begin to mentor or better mentor writers. Advisors who help students generate documents for clubs or student

government are, in our minds, also mentors of students' meaningful writing. Maybe your institution, department, or program has recently decided to turn attention and resources to supporting or assessing student writing, and is asking faculty to contribute to these initiatives. *Teaching Meaningful Writing* is designed to build on and from pedagogies instructors and mentors already practice across disciplines, especially if those pedagogies are already asset-based.

We offer fewer step-by-step directions than learn through student-by-student stories. The approach we take is designed to encourage new ways of thinking about teaching writing, and each chapter introduces new concepts to consider and apply in pedagogy. Throughout our middle three chapters, we offer many, many examples of the ways that meaningful writing happens and of how we believe the students of the Meaningful Writing Project explain teaching for meaningful writing. Meaningful writing connects students to course content; to their families, communities, and peers; and to their teachers and mentors (Chapter 3: Meaningful Connections). Meaningful writing also focuses on the writing students find consequential, rather than on the consequences they may face for not following the instructor's directions (Chapter 4: When Writing Is Consequential). Finally, meaningful writing opportunities are framed expansively, offering space for students to pursue topics for which they have passion and commitment (Chapter 5: Toward an Expansive Approach). In our last chapter (Chapter 6: Teaching Meaningful Writing), we offer some tips for supporting meaningful writing.

In this book we share the biggest takeaway from our research: students know what works best for them to learn, write, and become, but they want guidance and support. We have imagined readers of this book who want to improve their own, and their students', experiences with writing—readers who want student writing to be more connected to who students are, where they come from, and where they hope to be in the future. We have imagined readers who are committed to helping students develop new writing skills and knowledge in a course or program

but who seek a framework for making that writing more meaningful for students. We hope the framework for teaching writing we offer facilitates more meaningful writing experiences for students through their and our intentional actions. Engaging with this framework will, we hope, lead to a renewed interest in what students tell us they need—a renewed ability to hear their voices and respond with inclusive writing pedagogies that honor their hopes and dreams.