



Mary Lou Odom

## Review: *The Meaningful Writing Project* by Michele Eodice, Anne Ellen Geller, and Neal Lerner

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Members of the writing center community will need little encouragement to pick up Michele Eodice, Anne Ellen Geller, & Neal Lerner's book *The Meaningful Writing Project: Learning, Teaching, and Writing in Higher Education*. Not only is the book authored by three of the field's most recognized and consequential scholars, but the belief—and the desire to share the belief—that writing is meaningful lies at the heart of writing center identity. Perhaps somewhat surprisingly, the book only occasionally mentions writing centers; however, this should not suggest its relevance to writing center studies is limited. On the contrary, the authors show that experiencing a writing project as meaningful is “a shared phenomenon, one deeply enmeshed in our experiences of schooling in this country and in our experiences with writing and writing instruction” (p. 22). *The Meaningful Writing Project* speaks to anyone invested in student writing. For writing centers, it both affirms what we do and reveals our potential to do much more.

*The Meaningful Writing Project* is noteworthy for many reasons, not least of which is the prominence it gives to the voices of students, who, Eodice, Geller, & Lerner emphasize, “can tell us a great deal about our efforts if we take the time to listen” (p. 132). Unlike many cross-disciplinary

studies, their inquiry focuses on student learning rather than teacher action, and they rely on students' own accounts of writing in which they experienced "the power of personal connection, the thrill of immersion in thought, writing and research, and the satisfaction of knowing the work they produced could be applicable, relevant, and real world" (p. 4). To show how meaningful writing creates these opportunities for students, the authors suggest three frameworks: agency, engagement, and learning for transfer. While familiar, these concepts take on greater significance when considered through the lens of expansively framed learning (as articulated by Randi Engle, Diane Lam, Xenia Meyer, and Sarah Nix, 2012).

One appeal of *The Meaningful Writing Project* is the contrast between students' descriptions of meaningful writing and the seemingly endless declarations of literacy crises. Eodice, Geller, & Lerner highlight this hopefulness in Chapter 1 before turning to an extensive discussion of their qualitative, RAD (Haswell, 2005) research conducted across their three institutions. Two open-ended questions were central to their survey of seniors reflecting on writing completed during their undergraduate careers: 1. "Describe the writing project you found meaningful"; and 2. "What made that project meaningful for you?" (p. 148). Follow-up interviews were conducted, and student data were triangulated through surveys and interviews of faculty in whose classes students wrote their meaningful projects. Notably, undergraduate coresearchers (including writing center consultants) conducted the student and faculty interviews. Collaboratively, Eodice, Geller, & Lerner coded each of the 707 student-survey responses, 27 student interviews, 160 faculty surveys, and 60 faculty interviews. Using grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), they identified conditions most essential to students' meaningful writing projects. Chapters 2–5 detail those findings in the context of current research and offer illustrative case studies. Immediately following Chapter 1 is an infographic chapter for reference. Infographic data (and an invitation to contribute to the study) can be found at <http://meaningfulwritingproject.net/>.

Chapter 2 focuses on the framework of agency, and Eodice, Geller, & Lerner's discussion reminds us how challenging a goal agency is. Not only did students often describe the opportunities and freedom they found agentive in their meaningful writing "in contrast to the rest of their schooling" (p. 33), but the authors also note that the mere presence of such opportunities does not guarantee agency. Drawing on Marilyn Cooper's (2011) concept of agency as embodiment, they show that students develop a sense of agency in their writing through a social process connecting their identities (current or future) to others (instructors, peers, etc.) and to course content. The writing center has much to offer students as they engage in such a process: the social interaction that has long been a hall-

mark of our work (Harris, 1995) aids students in making these valuable connections every day. With greater intentionality in our talk, whether about subject matter, revision choices, or a student's future writing identity, writing center practice can promote more attainable student agency.

While Eodice, Geller, & Lerner note agency may be a possible outcome of a meaningful writing project, they suggest engagement, the framework discussed in Chapter 3, is first essential for meaningfulness to be realized. This characterization builds on established connections among learning, writing, and engagement (e.g., Bromley, Schonberg, & Northway, 2015; Light, 2004), and shows how engagement “enriches the opportunities to bring writers, purposes, and content together”—often within a student's meaningful writing project (p. 57). Reminiscent of their treatment of agency, the authors reject individualistic notions of engagement in favor of its social nature. They note engagement occurs not only when students connect with course content or processes but also through connections with others (instructors, peers, audiences) and the self (including notions of future selves). Of the book's three frameworks, engagement involves elements perhaps most recognizable within writing center studies. Like agency, engagement relies on both social elements and connections with student identity, but student-survey responses show that one-on-one interactions with faculty as well as peer-group work were significant factors in engagement too. Capitalizing on our ability to foster collaborative conversation about writing, writing centers can serve as yet another connection through which students can engage in meaningful writing opportunities.

Chapter 4 addresses learning for transfer and shows how meaningful writing projects offer students opportunities both to “transfer in” prior knowledge or personal connections and “transfer forward” to relevant future contexts. Perhaps the richest of the three framework chapters, it is here the authors' use of expansive framing is most fully realized in terms of the meaningful writing project: “With expansive framing, the attention is on the student and on the conditions necessary for successful learning for transfer, as well as on student agency and engagement with peers, instructors, and materials” (pp. 98–99). This attention to students and to the active role they play in their own learning allows us to see all three frameworks in relation to each other. It also aligns Eodice, Geller, & Lerner with other researchers (e.g., Beach, 1999; Nowacek, 2011; Wardle, 2012) who favor a shift in the terminology of transfer. For a writing center audience, this chapter resonates in two distinct ways. First, its emphasis on what students bring to writing and learning experiences echoes our commitment to working within students' own ideas and language. Second, undergraduate tutors can draw inspiration from students' willingness to

engage in unfamiliar writing tasks (80% of students' meaningful writing projects were *new* writing experiences). This last point seems particularly worth noting. Too often, though we celebrate the peer-to-peer culture of the writing center, we neglect to apply what we know about student writers to our student tutors. Readiness for new writing challenges is good news for students in general, but for undergraduate tutors who may find themselves doubly daunted when writers present new-to-them-both writing tasks, this finding may offer an extra level of assurance.

As its practical title “Meaningful Writing Happens When . . .” suggests, Chapter 5 is devoted to those features both students and faculty identify as fundamental in meaningful writing projects. Drawing on data from faculty surveys and interviews, Eodice, Geller, & Lerner explain that faculty perspectives allow them to “describe the contours of shared learning places in rich ways [they] could not see from student data alone” (p. 109). Coding of *both* faculty and student data revealed the potential of writing projects that allowed students to draw on personal connection, envision relevance to the real world and/or their futures, and become immersed in content and/or processes. It is these facets of the meaningful writing project Eodice, Geller, & Lerner “hope might be replicated in every setting—if not for every assignment” (p. 109). Some may argue that because writing centers do not design students' writing tasks, they cannot be such a setting. However, the authors point out that key to making these elements of meaningful writing real to students is the “role of explicitness” (p. 128). Certainly, few settings address student writing and writing processes more explicitly than writing centers.

In their concluding thoughts in Chapter 6, Eodice, Geller, & Lerner explain that “what *The Meaningful Writing Project* is about, foremost, is how much more students can gain when we frame the writing activities we want them to do as expansively inviting” (p. 135). Doing so, they argue, allows students to fulfill a kind of cocreator role in their own meaningful writing experiences, and the authors share their desire that *The Meaningful Writing Project* will help advance a more learner-centric paradigm for education. They celebrate what their study tells us about the how and where of meaningful writing: that it occurs in a variety of ways and in classes of all formats, sizes, and subject matter. Here, as they offer suggestions for fostering meaningful writing, the authors make their most overt reference to writing centers, urging attention to “the moments in writing center sessions . . . when questions can move students to make connections with their current and future selves” (p. 139). It is in these moments, through intentional practices such as asking more meaning-focused questions, that writing centers can transform themselves into sites where meaningful writing regularly occurs.

While the authors acknowledge that they refrained from forcing a metaphor on their findings in *The Meaningful Writing Project*, they do depict its central idea quite frequently in terms of one concept well known in writing center studies literature: space. The meaningful writing project, they tell us, is a space where students and faculty and course content come together, a space to resolve tensions between what students desire and what faculty intend, and a space where teachers can communicate how they wish writing to be meaningful for students. Ultimately, Eodice, Geller, & Lerner explain, “The meaningful writing project is a meeting space, one in which student agency, engagement, and learning for transfer are possible, enabled by the extent to which personal connection, applicability, and immersion in processes of researching, writing, and thinking might occur” (pp. 113–114). Given that writing center literature (including work by all three of these authors) has long engaged in talk of our centers as spaces beyond the straightforward, physical sense of location (e.g., Boquet, 2002; Grimm, 1996; Reynolds, 2004), we must continually ask: How can the writing center productively occupy these spaces as well?

Eodice, Geller, & Lerner share their hope that tutors, like teachers, will find useful the book’s “explicit lenses and language” (p. 136) for identifying how we might facilitate meaningful writing. As mentioned previously, writing center professionals looking for ways to connect the book’s findings to their own practice should easily be able to do so, for the conditions (personal connection, applicability, and immersion in researching, writing, and thinking processes) identified as key for students to experience meaningfulness often occur naturally in writing center work. In particular, becoming more attuned to the value of personal connection and immersion in process will enable writing tutors to help students construct their writing projects in more meaningful ways. Attending to these concepts can have other benefits as well, providing tutors with practical, real-world examples for conveying rhetorical concepts such as audience and context.

If they choose to, writing centers can figure prominently in a student’s experience of writing as meaningful. Eodice, Geller, & Lerner even suggest that “we (faculty, tutors, and mentors) have likely been underestimating our potential influence on student agency, engagement, and learning for transfer” (p. 135). Indeed, we know writing centers can play a positive role in students’ undergraduate experiences, but do we recognize the full extent of that potential? Consider one of our field’s earliest rallying cries: to produce better writers, not better writing. These words suggest confidence in a bold and ambitious mission. But . . . if students leave our centers having improved their writing yet having no greater sense of that writing as meaningful, then we must acknowledge we are not truly

producing better writers. What *The Meaningful Writing Project* ultimately offers the writing center field is the insight into how we *can* fulfill that mission as we share with students our belief that writing, especially their writing, has meaning.

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