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AGENCY AND THE MEANINGFUL WRITING PROJECT

As a student who is passionate about the environment, I was able to research in depth the actions that had been taken to respond to the issue, and to discuss the plans of officials to deal with the issue in the future. Not only was my paper relevant to my interests, but I was able to gain a better understanding of the workings of real-world agencies set up to deal with similar issues.

—Environmental geology major

We chose agency as one of our frameworks (along with engagement and learning for transfer) for exploring meaningful writing projects for two primary reasons: (1) as we analyzed why students told us their writing projects were meaningful, we repeatedly saw the ways in which students described opportunities or freedom to pursue topics of interest, to connect those topics to what they had passion for or had experienced, and to map their meaningful writing projects to their future writing and professional identities—as the student quote above describes. In addition, the agency students experienced with their meaningful writing projects was often offered in contrast to the rest of their schooling; (2) the development of student agency is a long-standing theme in writing and literacy studies and in education literature more generally, and deservedly so: having students gain control of their writing and actively constructing their learning is an important goal, but it is an elusive goal amidst the challenges of the social and material conditions they face.

There are multiple viewpoints from which to see and know agency.

In his work on transformative learning, John M. Dirkx (1998) has noted, “To be meaningful, what is learned has to be viewed as personally significant in some way; it must feel purposive and illuminate qualities and values of importance to the person” (9). The students in our study describe their meaningful writing projects similarly, and our most frequent codes of *personal connection* and *app+* are reflected in Dirkx’s quotation above as “personally significant” and “feel purposive.” What

is offered in an assignment is taken up by students when they recognize they have “the capacity for action . . . the capacity to critically shape their own responsiveness” to a given situation. This “capacity that works upon the self” is also a definition of agency (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 971).

This internal-versus-external debate over where agency might be initiated (i.e., starting with the learner versus starting with the teacher) is key to understanding student agency in educational contexts. We align ourselves with Marilyn Cooper’s (2011) definition of agency as “an emergent property of embodied individuals” (421); agency is embodied, not generated and internalized from external action, but, according to Jane Bennett (2001), “instead is based in individuals’ lived knowledge that their actions are their own” (155). Many students who participated in our study chose to reflect on a writing experience that confirmed that their actions were their own. Yet we, like Shari Stenberg (2015), resist seeing agency through the neoliberal lens in which “agency valorizes individualism, the subject who acts alone in service of individual gain and efficacy” and instead advocate for what Stenberg calls a “located agency that ultimately involves a turn toward others” (119). This “turn toward others” is prevalent in classes in which writing plays a central role, and agency is best defined as a result of social interactions among instructors, peers, and subject matter, all taking place within a matrix of identity and subject formation, and cognitive and social development, and infused with power and authority.

In educational contexts, students’ development of agency is also situated within a continuum of the long-standing function of education to replicate status-quo hierarchies or to offer opportunities to transform the status quo. Writing courses have long been positioned at various places on this continuum, whether the view is first-year writing courses as barriers to full participation (e.g., Berlin 1987; Crowley 1998) or upper-division writing courses as contexts in which students develop “discursive identities” aligned with their future aspirations (e.g., Poe, Lerner, and Craig 2010). Evidence from longitudinal studies of students’ writing development offers a far more nuanced view, with writing courses or, more accurately, disciplinary courses that contain significant writing components acting as both hurdles and opportunities (e.g., Beaufort 2007; Carroll 2002; Herrington and Curtis 2000; Leki 2007; Lillis 2002; Sternglass 1997). Still, we cannot help but think of Melzer’s 2014 study of writing assignments across the curriculum in which the preponderance of writing students encountered was largely “knowledge-telling” tasks or relatively brief written responses in exam contexts. In these situations, in which the assignments stand pretty low on the ladder of

Bloom's Taxonomy, we doubt much meaningful writing occurs. Thus, the impulse for us to foster agency is ever challenged by the inherently "reproductive" nature of schools and school-based writing (Hull and Katz 2006, 44).

When it comes to creating conditions for student agency to be possible, Moje and Lewis (2007) describe these:

Opportunity to learn . . . requires that participants have the space and support for agentic action, that is, that learners have opportunities to make and remake themselves, their identities, their discursive toolkits, and their relationships on the basis of the new ideas, practices, or discourses learned through their participation in a learning activity. (20)

As we show in this chapter, students' sense of meaningfulness *was* a particular kind of agency rooted in "new ideas, practices, or discourses learned through their participation in a learning activity," namely their meaningful writing projects. In other words, our claim is that students' perception that their writing is meaningful is also a perception of that writing experience as agentic.

We also must note that a surprising number of students (twenty-eight, or 4 percent of all those who completed the survey) chose not simply to ignore our invitation to tell us about their meaningful writing experiences but instead filled out the entire survey, only to report that they had *not* had any such experiences:

I haven't found any of my writing projects meaningful. They were always about something that did not necessarily interest me. Most of the time my assignments included a prompt or business that I needed to write about.

Within these "not meaningful" responses, we can see the elements that were in place for other students, and by contrasting *not meaningful* with *meaningful*, we can understand something about the conditions necessary for students to achieve agency.

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. However, such opportunities are shaped by instruction and by the writing task itself. After all, the writing tasks students reported on were often required assignments in required classes (the latter made up 56 percent of courses students named). Still, within such parameters, a space was created to allow students to find meaning in their writing projects and, further, to develop a sense of agency about themselves as writers, learners, and thinkers. Turning to our data, we see agency coming into play in several ways:

- The student writer gains agency via the actions of instructors, who have created an opportunity for the meaningful writing project to take place.
- Agency is gained/performed by actors (both people and things) other than the instructor in relation to the meaningful writing project: classmates or peers, content/topic, and the meaningful writing project itself might all play agentic roles.
- Students imagine the meaningful writing project will help them gain agency in future writing situations.

In the following sections, we explore each of these topics, drawing on survey and interview data.

GAINING AGENCY THROUGH INSTRUCTORS AND THE MEANINGFUL WRITING PROJECT

When students offered reasons for why they chose a particular writing project as most meaningful, it was uncommon for them to note the role of their teacher. Interactions with the instructor of the course, which we coded *engagement*, occurred in only 7 percent of all survey responses (and *engagement* in our coding could also include interacting with individuals outside the classroom; responses that indicated working with peers or classmates we coded *collaboration*). Nevertheless, in our analysis of student-survey results, we saw a clear pattern emerge in terms of how particular writing assignments—and often the acts of faculty to shape and deliver those assignments—resulted in students’ making note of a particular kind of agency. More specifically, in 31 percent of responses as to why they chose a project as meaningful, we heard seniors make some mention that it was because the project *allowed* or gave them the opportunity to pursue a topic or write in a particular form. At times, students were referring to the task itself—and thus tied it to the instructor in a somewhat indirect way—but other students specifically cited the instructor as the actor who “allowed” or “gave an opportunity”:

- The professor gave us a lot of freedom in what topic to choose and how to explore it.
- Research project during my required writing course where the professor let us choose a topic of our liking.
- Writing is really a personal experience so the fact that the professor acted as a guide rather than a dictator really facilitated my improvement throughout the class.

In interviews, students offered more thorough accounts of the roles their instructors played, as in the following sociology major’s account, which describes recognition of the professor’s socially constructed

learning context and how that led this student to take agency in relation to her writing:

She was very articulate, so a lot of the students respected her, but she was also very friendly and not really “I know more than you do.” It was more “We’re all learning together.” She was always available. I could e-mail her my paper and ask her to look over it, make suggestions. I went to her office hours. I guess providing all of those activities and mixing it up because people have different learning styles, too, whether it’s a self-review, or a peer review, or a group thing.

In another interview, a student responded this way to a question about the role her instructor played: “She acted as this guide. I don’t know the role she played in other people’s writing classes. I know for me it was very much why the project was meaningful. I think she played a role in that because she allowed us to make it meaningful for ourselves.”

In survey responses, students made explicit reference to the role their instructors played in making the writing project meaningful:

- It was meaningful because I got to work closely with a faculty mentor on original research.
- I really enjoyed that I was able to work one on one with a teacher and that I was able to devote the entire semester to working on this project.
- It was the first time a professor went out of their way to make sure each student was writing something they were passionate about.
- The professor gave a lot of feedback throughout the process which facilitated the development of the project.

What is interesting is that every one of these responses describes some way in which the instructor’s actions led to the students’ development of their projects. Notice that students use words like “helped” and “facilitated” in relation to implicitly or explicitly describing their own agency.

Much more frequently, however, students referred to their instructors indirectly through elements of the assignment in particular, emphasizing the elements of choice or freedom we have already described, as in the following:

- I had great guidance and encouragement from my professor, but was given full flexibility in terms of what I focused on, how I approached my topic, how I did my research, etc.
- I was asked to construct an informational pamphlet, but was allowed a lot of creative freedom; we could choose the topic and even the medium in which the information was to be displayed.
- We were allowed to choose any topic we desire to write about in the field of medicine, science, etc.

- We were given the opportunity to choose a topic of interest to us and were guided through a writing process (emphasis on it as a process) to compose four polished documents each of a different genre.
- The essays were meaningful because I was given the opportunity to create my own research-based thesis, and explore a topic about which I am passionate.

Having been offered any degree of freedom to choose topics for their writing seemed particularly important for students to note, and their responses often spoke to how relatively rare it was for students to exercise this level of agency:

- I was able to pick a topic that speaks to me related to government on a personal level as opposed to working toward the professor's topical expectations.
- I actually could get to choose what I wanted to read and research about.
- In this paper I was finally able to choose my topic and research something I was very interested in.
- Normally, I don't have the opportunity to write about a topic I'm interested in.

Still, there was a clear limit to this freedom for many students, as an equally frequent pattern (occurring in 35 percent of all survey responses) was for students to remark that an instructor or writing task "required" or "forced" them into some action. And, at times, these qualities were almost symbiotic (emphasis added):

- This project was really useful because it *allowed* me to research something in my field academically and thoroughly. I was *forced* to find multiple valid sources, and from it, write something that was "real."
- I was *required* to come up with an original research question and create a grant proposal. . . . The project was meaningful because it *allowed* me to explore my creative scientific thinking.
- The project was so meaningful to me because it *allowed* me and *forced* me to relive moments I tried to forget and feelings I forgot I had.

Perhaps the ultimate sweet spot is found between instructor requirements and students' freedom to choose:

The paper itself was a research paper on a topic that we got to choose. I liked the fact that we got to discuss something we truly enjoyed from the class, and that the professor also had a narrow enough prompt to where we weren't floundering around for topic ideas. It gave us guidance without boundaries.

The contrast between "guidance" and "boundaries" appears significant to these writers as well. Too little of the former, and students

are “floundering”; too many of the latter, and students are denied the agency to explore meaningful topics.

GAINING AGENCY THROUGH PEERS, CONTENT, TOPICS, AND THE MEANINGFUL WRITING PROJECT ITSELF

As we noted previously, when students mentioned in the survey an instructor, classmate, or peer as contributing to the meaningful writing project, we coded that response *engagement*. We were somewhat surprised surprised that *engagement* occurred in only 7 percent of all survey responses, given what we assumed to be the relatively common practice of peer review. However, in response to one of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) writing questions (which we describe in more detail in the next chapter), over 57 percent of students reported that they talked with “classmates, friends, or family members” before drafting, and nearly half received feedback from these noninstructor actors. In response to our survey question “Why meaningful?,” students described peers and classmates as playing strong roles:

- I was able to choose topics that I found relevant to me and was able to give and receive feedback about my project from my peers.
- I was able to work with other students and create something that made me closer to my campus and could offer the same furthering bond to other people.
- I also loved how the class focused on writing instead of literary content—the writing process was different for this paper, because we went over drafts in class, did peer editing, and shared our final results with each other. In most English classes, you write the paper by yourself, hand it in, and wait for your final grade. This writing experience was much more engaging.

In addition to instructors and classmates, other actors in students’ lives played strong roles in making their writing projects meaningful and, thus, helping them gain a sense of agency. One actor students described in the survey was the community in various forms, whether inside or outside the classroom:

- Being able to present my research and discuss it with major state political and educational figures made the project and its findings seem even more pressing and made the project resound even deeper with me.
- What made the project meaningful was that it allowed me to volunteer at a food shelter in Jamaica. It was nice to help others and do something meaningful.

- I volunteered with a private, tuition free elementary school for homeless children.
- When I know that my work will shed light on a subject or improve the design of something, I feel gratified. I am motivated to complete a writing project when I know it really help people and isn't purely academic.
- I felt this project was meaningful because I got to do real research to apply what I had learned in class. It also allowed me to get to know an elderly person. The experience overall was fantastic.

In addition to students' gaining a sense of agency through their actions of working with community members, we also saw that the content of students' projects themselves—and students' interaction with that content—led to a type of agency. As we note in chapter 1, the three most frequent codes for why students noted a writing project as meaningful were *personal connection*, *app+*, and *content learning*. In many of these instances, students made meaning through the interaction of these three elements. In other words, students had or made a connection to the content of the project itself, which, in turn, mapped onto students' sense of their past, present, and future lives. This identity-making in progress was thus enabled by the meaningful writing project:

- I truly cared about the content of the paper. I was exposed to the idea of it by some of my friends who are gay and researching more and more about it, I really loved the comparisons that I could draw between networks. I think another reason it was meaningful was knowing that the issue was real-life and something I could certainly see myself doing in a profession of my choosing.
- First of all, this paper was to be on a topic of my choosing, and I created this one, which makes it more personal and exciting from the start. But also, I believe that, much like in the era of the Depression, we are at a crossroads that requires a fundamental shift in how we think about national success. Subjective indicators are being adapted for Western use all the time, and the UN just endorsed the movement away from GDP alone in favor of a more comprehensive and subjective measurement of capability and prosperity. So, this topic is immediately relevant both to me and to the Western world.

What we see in these responses is the development of students' agency through their interaction with subject matter they truly care about or to which they have a personal (including career) connection. As one student described in an interview, "This [project] was the most meaningful because it was based on my own research rather than stuff I had found in books or online. I actually got to see firsthand what I was writing about."

MEANINGFUL WRITING AND FUTURE AGENCY

While agency is often activated within varied scenes of undergraduate writing—as students work from what Hull and Katz (2006) call “present capabilities”—we also observed a kind of agency that stretched toward “imagined futures,” the places students could see themselves writing (44). More specifically, nearly 70 percent of all students surveyed felt their meaningful writing projects would be the type of writing they might encounter in the future. That the meaningful writing project they told us about often included this prescience suggests to us that fostering agency requires us to consider both *for now* and *for later*. Strauss and Xiang (2006) describe agency as demonstrated through “an awareness of the task at hand [and] an understanding of the demands of that task” (356). In one of our interviews, a student recognized the task, what was demanding about it, and how it would impact his future:

It was meaningful because I was picturing myself like a professional. Those are the kinds of project reports that your boss could ask you to rewrite. I took this very seriously. It was meaningful because it was something new. But at the same time it was very, very demanding and then difficult at times. You need to gather your resources and then you need to have the adequate level of writing English skill.

We often saw students locating their future selves in relation to writing and imagining a kind of agency they would have in these situations:

- As a graduate school student I will have to discuss the theory behind my work in depth. As a career artist I also must be able to write about my work when I submit it to juried exhibitions.
- As a physician assistant I will have to write referral letters to other physicians, physician assistants, and health professionals to detail them about the status of our mutual patients. This is a particular writing skill that is vital for me to master and I felt that this writing project allowed me to mentally prepare myself for this important professional writing.
- As a teacher, I must write lesson plans that are creative—this project helped me to think outside the box.
- As an engineer I will be asked to write proposals for projects, memos about projects, and completion reports.
- As an environmental sciences major, it’s important to be able to write clearly and concisely about the problems we tackle, but also to find the solutions that will benefit not just the victims, but also the perpetrators in order to best change their behavior.

We note here the intertwined nature of identity, writing, and subject matter and the ways these elements combine for students to imagine future agency. We must also note the complexity of writing tasks that

are “practical” or keyed specifically to the kinds of writing students might do after graduation. On the one hand, we acknowledge the moving target students’ futures provide and the dangers of narrowly constructing writing tasks with some sort of future in mind (as well as how difficult it is to convince students that a current writing task will be useful in some vague future context). On the other hand, we consistently see students in our study making those connections to their future selves, and their connections are not narrowly constructed. In other words, when they told us how they anticipated the future connections to their meaningful writing project experiences, students offered a fairly capacious view of how their meaningful writing projects would map to future writing situations.

- This type of project has given me confidence to pursue a masters degree.
- Yes! So much so. I want to take my analytic abilities elsewhere and apply them in the world! It really has given me the tool to take my skills other places.
- I would like to do the kinds of analysis used in this paper.
- Business writing is useful everywhere.

Whether these kinds of projects are the norm in our students’ lives is a question we cannot answer; however, we are greatly encouraged by these possibilities for writing and its role in students’ futures and their continued development of agency.

Of course, not all students felt their meaningful writing projects would connect to their future lives. As we noted previously, 31 percent of survey respondents cited a writing project as meaningful but responded “no” to “For the project you’ve described as meaningful, are there ways in which this writing project might contribute to the kinds of writing you hope to do in the future?” Students’ responses to why they answered no to this question offer, in many cases, an imagined (or hoped for?) future without much writing:

- I am a business major so I don’t see myself really using this writing in the future.
- I am going into a field that does not require a lot of writing.
- I do not intend on writing any technical papers in the future.
- I don’t want to be a writer and hopefully won’t have to write papers.

While we suspect that these students will encounter more writing in their futures than they anticipated as graduating seniors, these responses are most interesting when read against those students who *do*

imagine their meaningful writing projects mapping onto future writing contexts. In many of those instances, students thought broadly about the skills, strategies, and habits of mind the meaningful writing project developed and invoked. They saw a role for writing in their futures that was far more than a certain type of task but was instead a way of connecting with subject matter, colleagues, and careers. As we describe in chapter 4, “Learning for Transfer,” we think this phenomenon may also have something to do with how many of the opportunities created by meaningful writing projects were also opportunities in which learning was expansively framed (Engle et al. 2012).

THE ABSENCE OF AGENCY

As we noted earlier in this chapter, twenty-eight students filled out the entirety of our survey only to tell us they had not had any meaningful writing experiences. One way to understand these responses is to see them as the absence of agency. In fact, students often indicated that they felt they were missing out on what would have been a vital experience. As one student wrote,

I don't remember any meaningful project because writing to me is more of a chore for me and I do not find it enjoyable, no matter what the topic. I usually feel that when I am writing for an assignment I am writing for a purpose that is not for myself, I am writing to appease the teacher and I am writing to get an “A.”

We hoped, of course, that these students represented a small-but-vocal contingent, but we have no way of knowing for sure. And, of course, in light of Melzer's (2014) findings of the domination of “knowledge-telling” writing tasks, largely under timed, high-stakes conditions with the examiner as the only audience, the opportunities for meaningful writing—and, thus, agency—might not be as widespread as we would hope. As Melzer (2014) states in the conclusion to his study, “Sixty-six percent of the assignments had informative purposes, with an emphasis on informing the reader (almost always the expert instructor) about factual details from a lecture or readings” (104). Consider one student who compared the meaningful writing project experience to all of her other writing projects (which she might as well have characterized as *not meaningful*):

It contributed to my ability to enjoy writing papers. I like writing papers that can have a degree of creativity and even humor in them (even though the opportunities are few and far between in college), and writing papers like that periodically helps me write better when I am writing the

comparatively dull stuff. It's easier to color within the lines the rest of the time if every so often you get a chance to scribble all over the page; if that metaphor makes sense.

What is most interesting to us about the responses from the “no-meaningful-writing” group is that the absences they make note of are in accord with the themes we saw for those who did have meaningful writing projects; in other words, they note the need for personal connection, for content learning, for applicability and relevance and, in several cases, for creativity and choice. They recognize what the assignment was “not” (Nowacek 2011) but remain unable to articulate what it *could be*.

We did also wonder whether this set of twenty-eight students was somehow different demographically from the group as a whole. As shown in figure 2.1, this group's profile largely fit the profile of all survey respondents, representing disciplines from accounting to zoology, so we cannot conclude that particular majors might result in a lack of meaningful writing experiences. And these students were pretty much evenly distributed across our three institutions, ruling out institutional differences as a factor.

Some of this group, like the student quoted above, seemed simply to not identify as writers:

- I don't really like writing.
- I hate writing.
- I do not plan on writing for my career.
- I'm not a fan of writing.

Most of the other students expressed disappointment that the writing they had encountered did not offer opportunities for agency. For several students, even the genre-based writing connected to their chosen fields was far from meaningful:

- I can be honest and say that I haven't one writing project during my undergraduate career meaningful. As a science major I have been delegated to writing lab reports and research proposals almost exclusively. There have been no opportunities to write opinionated, personal pieces or works of fiction.
- Did not have any writing projects that were meaningful because I did not have to take English because of AP credits and the rest were pertaining to lab reports (not meaningful).
- Writing project in business school? no.

For some, the writing they encountered simply did not inspire them or create much excitement:

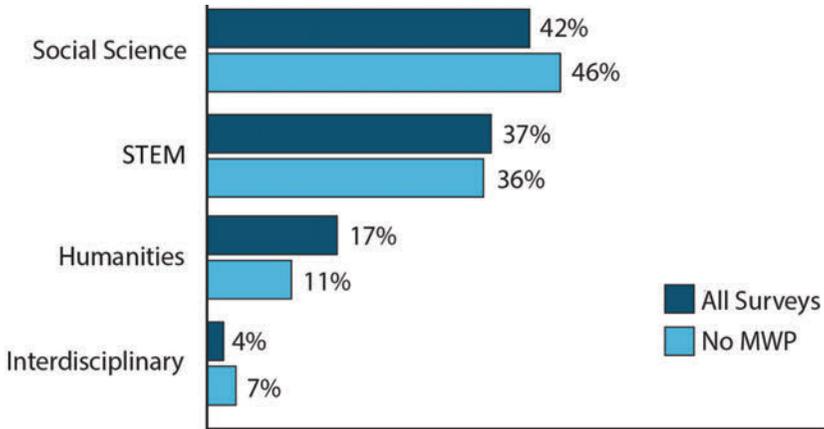


Figure 2.1. Majors of all survey respondents compared to those who indicated no meaningful writing projects.

- I didn't really have any meaningful writing projects; they all seemed uninspired and the prompts weren't unique.
- I did not find the writing to be anything fantastic. It was all very bland and did not incorporate much creativity.
- I would have found a writing project that allowed me to express my creativity or one that allowed me to project my ideas and opinions to be meaningful.

For others, the lack of personal connection and relevance to their lives and careers meant an absence of meaningful writing:

- I cannot remember any writing projects that I have had. So, I believe it is a safe assumption that none of the writing projects I had had a great impact on me.
- Any writing I've completed for [my university] has been academically driven and graciously assessed. While they may have promoted some analytical thought at times, the types of writing that I have been asked to complete have no bearing on my future professional endeavors.
- The writing that is done in college does not apply to real life. I do not use any type of writing, that is part of my college courses, in my professional career. The professional career people I come in contact with do not write in any manner they did in college. I teach adults, and I don't write in the manner that is dictated in college.

For one student, meaningful education needed to be self-sponsored or completed independently:

None of my writing projects have really stood out to me. My hope was to become a sports writer, but found no outlet or classes that catered to that desire. Instead I was lumped in with the rest of the [journalism college's]

students and shoveled the same thing that everyone is. . . . I understand that its part of the curriculum to make the students balanced and to, in theory, be on the same page. This was boring and left me feeling unfulfilled. My greatest experiences (and most enjoyable) were independent projects.

Ultimately, students in this group did not find writing to matter much in their academic lives. Some strongly wished that had not been the case or that writing might have promoted the kind of agency they seemed to yearn for and expect their college experience to produce. Instead, these seniors are graduating without having had a meaningful writing experience, an absence that seems unfortunately familiar (e.g., Arum and Roksa 2011) and is a reminder of the powerful role of writing as agentic—at least for some students. The Meaningful Writing Project helps reveal the difference in experiences between the students who did not find agency through writing and the students who did.

CASE STUDIES OF MEANINGFUL WRITING AND AGENCY

In the case studies that follow, we explore students' development of agency in more depth, beginning with a student who was largely an exception to our overall trends: her meaningful writing project did not take place in a class context, yet it helped her develop a sense of agency over her writing in contrast to what she had experienced in school-based tasks. Our second case study features a student in a business-ethics class finding his way as a writer who wants to balance creativity with how he might have an influence in the professional discourse in his field. In both cases, agency is enabled by interaction with others (whether faculty or family members), with experiences and topics, and with students' hoped-for futures.

CASE STUDY 1—LEAH: AGENCY AND A FAMILY AUDIENCE

Our first case study of student agency via a meaningful writing project focuses on Leah,² a senior physical therapy major, who identified on our survey as a "White/Caucasian," "female," and "22–25 years old." Leah described her meaningful writing project as follows: "After my trip to China, I wrote an article about it and my experiences working in a pediatric burn unit." When responding to the question of why this project was meaningful, Leah wrote, "I got to explain the trip in my own way and be creative. I also got to put pictures in of my trip." We coded this

² In this first case study and in all other uses of student and faculty names in this book, we have created pseudonyms to ensure participant confidentiality.

response *creative* and *personal connection*. Leah also indicated she had not written anything like this article previously and did not imagine doing this type of writing in her future, noting, “My future career will be physical therapy where I’ll be writing a lot of patient notes but nothing more than that unless I get into research.”

In Leah’s interview with Pedro, a senior English major, she reveals an uncertain history with writing and how this family-oriented out-of-school task brought to bear her interests and experiences. The agency she experienced with this meaningful writing project might not necessarily have turned her from a reluctant writer to an eager one or mapped onto the future writing she might do as a physical therapist, but in the moment it gave her a certain power over her experiences and a way to convey those experiences to a real audience. In other words, it was a meaningful writing opportunity Leah contrasted with her previous writing opportunities.

In terms of her history as a writer, Leah tells Pedro, “I’m not a good writer. . . . I get very frustrated with writing, and I hit a block. . . . I think I chose a path to avoid reading and writing since they’re my weaknesses.” When she describes the writing she has done as an undergraduate, she reveals more uncertainty and unease:

I’m a physical therapy major, so we don’t really have to write much. We had, I think, our sophomore writing class. I don’t even remember. Then our advanced writing class. I think we had two writing classes in all. I wouldn’t say it helped or hurt me in either way. I’m pretty neutral about them. One was more research based, I’d say, and neutral. They didn’t do much. They frustrated me because I’m not good at writing.

When Leah talks more specifically about the kind of writing she’s done as an undergraduate, she refers several times to her feelings of a forced march of sorts with a predetermined structure. She expresses a wish that the writing assignments would have been more creative and allowed more freedom or agency:

If [the writing] was more of an open, free write, I think it would have helped. Because then I feel like my mind could have taken me to, “Oh, well this is where my mind’s thinking, so I want to write about that,” as opposed to, “This is where they’re forcing my mind to go, and I don’t know what to write about, and this is the structure of the project, but I’m not passionate about it so it’s harder to write about.”

In contrast to these school-based tasks, the writing Leah did for her family newsletter allowed her to connect to a passion and to be creative. Here’s how she describes the project to Pedro:

I went on a trip to China to work at a pediatric burn unit in Beijing. We have a big family, and so we have a family newsletter that goes out four times a year. I was asked to write an article about the trip to China in the newsletter. Basically, it was just free writing and just explaining what I learned, funny instances, what I saw, what a typical day was, stuff like that.

For Leah, her newsletter article had a specific, familiar audience: her family members. And her “literacy sponsor” (Brandt 1998) in this case was a cousin who was the editor of the newsletter and who gave her feedback on her initial draft. Still, while the task had exigency for Leah, her processes for creating the newsletter article weren’t without struggle. As she describes, “I was stuck for a good hour. I just kept thinking, ‘Oh, I don’t know what to write, I don’t know how to start this.’” Eventually, she chose to start, “writing it like a letter home, to family, or journal entry almost, and that’s when it came out easier.”

Ultimately, then, Leah was able to capture in writing her experience as an unpaid volunteer with an organization that helps pediatric burn patients with medical care. Her experiential learning seems particularly relevant here, which she contrasts with the classroom-based learning in her past:

[The experience] was different because I didn’t have to write about any research or any medical things, and I was learning all new stuff since I hadn’t really learned anything about burns here. It was something new, and more that I didn’t have to study or look up anything and write about somebody else’s work, and I had all the knowledge to write it, and that I could just write. It wasn’t that I had to find other knowledge and learn more to write it.

While Leah’s reluctance to engage in library research in order to write—a common task in her required writing classes—is somewhat discouraging to those of us who assign and value such assignments, we do wonder whether it is possible to capture the qualities she valued and that gave her agency in this meaningful project in order to return them to classroom contexts. What she became knowledgeable about on the trip was appealing both because it was new and because it was learned experientially. The balance between *allow* and *require* once again seems key in Leah’s experience, and we wonder whether her writing experiences up to this point were too close to the *require* end of the continuum with not enough *allow*. Her agency seems closely tied to the freedom and creativity she could bring to bear on this writing project. As she notes in her interview, “I think creativity is not my strong suit, so I feel like, with another project, if I couldn’t have been creative, as maybe why I wouldn’t like it as much as I did with this one.” Leah also received tangible, positive

feedback from her relatives once they read her article, which offered a sense of accomplishment and perhaps some shift in her self-identity as a writer with an audience: “When I got responses from people, it was great to know that people were actually reading it and that they appreciated it. They complimented me on my writing, which I always think is terrible, so it’s good to hear that.”

Near the end of their interview, Pedro asks Leah if there were any other significant takeaways from this meaningful writing project. Leah’s response indicates the role she sees for writing as a way of making sense of her experiences:

I think being able to reflect back on the trip was significant. Maybe when I was there I didn’t realize what bothered me, what didn’t, what I was learning, what I could have skipped. Reflecting back on it, I realized more of “This was a good experience, this was a bad experience. I would have changed this. I regret doing this.”

Pedro follows up this response by asking if such reflection is a common practice for Leah. She responds, “I don’t think I write enough to be able to reflect enough.” In our hopeful moments we wonder whether the air of regret Leah expresses here would spur her on to engage in more reflective writing. Was the agency she experienced with her newsletter article—in control of not merely the processes of writing but also the opportunity to connect meaningful content to a real audience—a one-time occurrence? Leah does note to Pedro that she might write more for the family newsletter in the future, but she imagines a career largely devoid of such creative and open-ended writing experiences, those closely tied to *personal connection*. Of course, many other students we surveyed and interviewed were able to find creative space and personal connection with school-based tasks, perhaps even with the same kind of tasks Leah experienced. The spaces we create for students to experience agency are not always yet inhabited—but understanding (and creating) those spaces is a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for meaningful writing to occur.

CASE STUDY 2—ERIK: AGENCY AND A VISION OF A FUTURE SELF

Our second case study of student agency via a meaningful writing project is Erik, a senior finance major who identified in our survey as “Asian,” “male,” and “18–21.” He described his meaningful writing project as follows: “Analyzing the impact of business ethics in today’s economy and society.” When we asked why his project was meaningful, Erik wrote, “The

relevance to today's ethically volatile and corrupted business practices." We coded this response *app+*. Erik said he had never before written anything like this project when he took his class as a sophomore but that he did plan to write something like it in the future. In fact, he expressed a goal for himself in his survey response: "I intend to contribute to the journal of business ethics looking into privacy and social implications in the development of technology and business information systems."

In his interview, Erik had much more to say about the experience of writing his meaningful writing project; the role his instructor, who was adjunct faculty, played in supporting his writing and revision process; the relationship between thinking of himself as a creative writer and/or a business writer; and the way in which this one project in a required business-ethics class showed him the agency that could be possible for him as a professional and scholarly voice in the field of business.

Erik tells his interviewer, an undergraduate writing center consultant, he felt his professor's passion and describes his professor's "strong interest in taking theoretical principles and applying them practically to issues of business development." His writing assignment, which occurred toward the end of the semester, was to take a major theme from the business-ethics book, look at articles from business leaders, and "go with it and argue." Erik set out to develop an argument against privacy and wanted to propose that privacy holds back business development. And he says he learned through the writing and revision process that the piece he was creating had to "provide change or raise topics that people don't normally think about and you need to have not only a strong argument but the facts behind it."

When the undergraduate interviewer asks Erik what he believes makes a writing project meaningful, he says, "What makes papers meaningful to me is the [professor's] ability to present a growth opportunity for a student." When the interviewer asks Erik what he means by "growth opportunity," Erik elaborates by explaining how a professor would say, "I'm not grading you on your ability to piece together sentences and ideas in an elementary sense. It's more presenting this is an opportunity for you to grow as a person, for you to grow as a writer." The interviewer asks him what the professor did or said in their meetings that helped him see this project through, and he says, "He saw my vision, he saw what I was capable of. He asked why? Why are you thinking that?" Erik says his professor worked to find out what he thought was truly important in all he was trying to argue, and he was "inquisitive to my thought process." And he says his professor "really wanted [him] to see this paper."

It's interesting to hear what Erik says about his sense of himself as a writer coming into the process of writing his meaningful writing project and then, later, as a senior, in reflection on what happened for him as he wrote the project:

I'm a creative writer at heart, but when I stepped into business, as a student, I had to really adjust and grow in that type of environment. That forced me to be more concise and my writing to be more definitive in that aspect. That's what made me write this paper. I was just passionate at the time. I was so geared to prepare myself to write this paper. It was unbelievable how everything just matched up with my growing interests and just the overall subject matter.

In reflecting on his project, Erik clearly had a sense that his professor was aware of the knowledge (and perhaps passion) students might have and the knowledge—both writing knowledge and disciplinary and professional stance—they might need to learn from him. And Erik could tell not every student in his class was as open to this learning and to his professor's mentorship as he was:

I think he was one of the professors that really took strides in taking students to a different level in terms of not only writing creatively but having facts behind your suggestions or being more a writer that was not only producing fluff and attractive pieces, the kind of things that are factual and can be put in journals. It gave me that idea. I never thought that it would be possible to produce writing like this, so that happened in the perfect timing, if you will. Some students obviously didn't take advantage, because I was really, really passionate about this piece, but that's basically it.

In Erik's mind, his professor had led students up to this project through earlier assignments: in "the other writing assignments, he stressed the structure and having proper syntax, just proper structure through your paper in general, and having a theme that linked everything together. That's what connected his assignments as well, was that constant push for having students really express their thoughts in a structured way that was argumentative, yet having substance."

Erik described meeting with his professor more than ten times during the semester—sometimes right after class and sometimes in the early morning in the adjunct lounge—but, as his interviewer described in a postinterview reflection, "Strangely, his writing process was a one nighter, which lasted 20 hours." The interview exchange that explains Erik's writing process and interaction with his professor is worth reproducing here. With a tone reminiscent of one of our favorite meaningful writing project survey quotes, in which a student says, "Though I cannot stand the professor or the majority of what she teaches . . . ,"

Erik notes that his professor's approach did not leave him happy, but it left him determined.

Robert: How was the process? What process did you take in writing this?

Erik: I paired up my ideas that I had with each article that was in the textbook and drew it out. It was probably one of the most well-planned pieces of mine. Just doing piece by piece by piece by piece, eventually connecting everything and having some type of synergy. That took a while.

Then finally, him critiquing it in the adjunct office at like 8 a.m. when I pulled an all-nighter for the paper. Him telling me it's a lot of stuff there, boil it down to about five pages. Moving from twenty to five pages was a challenge. All of that together motivated me, pushed me. I didn't like him, to be honest, throughout the whole semester. I did not like him.

The reason why I did not is because, looking back, he pushed me more than I wanted to be pushed. But looking back it helped me to develop as a business student and gaining a writing style that was not only influential but really had substance in it. Not just, like I said, I was more of a creative writer to begin with. Having thoughts and producing entertaining pieces or producing pieces that were analytical and thought provoking was my nature. But just pairing that style and that passion up with something that was so business centric, that was just an amazing journey to complete that.

Robert: How did he push you?

Erik: He definitely was not confrontational. He pushed me very indirectly by just saying, in a really structured way, "Narrow the piece down, use this as support. Your piece lacks substance. Your piece does not reflect this quality that you put in your introduction. It doesn't fully explain it properly." Just little things, and as the piece developed and grew, he was there to really provide guidelines for the structure of the piece.

Robert: What was your immediate reaction when you walked out of the office hearing about all that?

Erik: I had other finals at the time and I was crestfallen, because I thought that I had produced an incredible masterpiece that took twenty hours to do. At the end of the day I looked at myself and I said, "You know what? It's not about producing words." It's more about—not even attractive and just wonderful words—but just more has to have structure. It has to have structure. It has to have substance. It has to have these qualities that make it meaningful to a bigger audience, not only a selective group. Having a business paper, you need to provide change or you need to raise topics that people don't normally think of. To immediately challenge someone's viewpoint, you need to have not only a strong argument but also the facts behind it. That's what I understood from the piece.

As a senior, Erik feels that this project, and this mentorship, was key to who he became as a writer in college. He tells his interviewer, "He didn't add the structure. We did. That was incredible." And he goes on to say, "The ability to take the piece apart and analyze it and put it back together and see what was there and what was not there. I think that analytical

piece and that businesslike characteristic of his critiques were really important. That's what translated across all my writing pieces until today."

Toward the end of their interview, the undergraduate interviewer pushes Erik to say a bit more about what professors can do to support meaningful writing experiences for students. He says, "Give everyone the benefit of the doubt that the whole room, everyone, is capable of writing an incredible piece that's going to impact the whole world." To us, that's a good description of teaching writing for student agency.

CONCLUSION

In the case of meaningful writing, students' development of agency is rooted in their interactions with texts, subject matter, teachers, peers, and family members, as well as with personal histories and future aspirations. Their acknowledgment of these relationships and the roles these relationships play looks like the kind of reflectiveness "special to human agency" (Bratman 2000, 61), particularly if students see the ultimate goal as the further development of agency via planning for their future selves. Like empowerment, agency is not something we can (or should) bestow on students. At best, we can intentionally build optimal conditions for agency to emerge. Agency is strengthened by offering experiences that get students to notice they have the capacity to direct energies for themselves, in and beyond classrooms.

Writing remains a key to entering a discourse community, and one might argue that those students who chose to identify a meaningful writing project and respond to our survey were those who found success in that endeavor. We cannot conclude that all others were not successful, of course, but we can draw from our research data to better understand the relationship among identity, discourse, and agency and, in particular, the interactions among students, instructors, and peers—and content—that make agency possible. And we saw that *personal connection* was a prominent feature in the meaningful writing projects. But the felt sense of the value and pleasure of the project was evidenced through other features as well, such as *choice*. One student remarked that the choice he had in both the direction and topic of his project was "the most rewarding part":

If I ever do any research on my own in the future, it's going to have to be something that I'm going to have to like, want to be really interested in, to put all the time and effort into it. But also be able to build it from the ground up, and not be like just trying to meet some criteria of a professor . . . something that I'm going to have to gather all the information for

and be able to convince a third party person of my argument, rather than my professor, who knows what the right answer is. . . . That's why this one was probably the most valuable writing experience I had.

His recognition that future writing tasks will require *his* “time and effort to build it from the ground up” speaks of agency. Whether we call it *maturity*, *self-actualization*, *self-efficacy*, or *self-authorship* (Baxter Magolda 1999), any view of writers as developing (a view we three share) will agree that the conditions and opportunities designed within a writing assignment can contribute to further development of agency. As Juan Guerra (2015) explains, citing the New London Group's work, “It is not enough for students to articulate or critique what they have learned and now understand, that is, it is not enough for them to become aware in a self-reflective manner of their newly acquired knowledge; they must also be able to engage in transformed practice: teachers must give students actionable opportunities ‘to demonstrate how they can design and carry out, in a reflective manner, new practices embedded in their own goals and values’” (110). Helping students realize agency—as they gain control of their academic, intellectual, and professional present lives and ever-expanding futures—is a goal we can all easily support.