

ADVICE

Will They Remember Writing It?



By James M. Lang | NOVEMBER 05, 2017

Last year, my family moved to a new house across town, closer to the college where I teach. During the occasional pause in the packing, I opened boxes that had been moldering in the basement to see whether they were move-

worthy. In one of them, I discovered a cache of papers that I had written as an undergraduate. They were gathered in a yellow folder which I had pretentiously titled — how I wish I were making this up! — "Literary and Philosophical Criticism."

It will come as no surprise to anyone on the back side of 40 that I found many papers in there that I had little recollection of writing. But it did come as something of a surprise to encounter entire courses that I had little recollection of taking.

As I paged through my almost-forgotten essays on Aristotle's views on slavery in *Politics*, on the two missionaries in *Things Fall Apart*, or on the action and language in *Pamela*, I finally hit upon the one paper I knew I would find. I still remembered it in much greater detail than any other assignment from my college years: a 20-page analysis of the film *My Dinner With Andre*, written for a senior seminar I took on late-20th-century poetry and performance.

That essay represented the culmination of my double major in English and philosophy. Although the seminar was housed in my English major, I had learned as an undergraduate that my professors loved it when I referred to texts and ideas from other classes and disciplines. In that long essay on Andre Gregory and Wallace Shawn's film I pulled together perspectives from both literature and philosophy in support of my analysis.

I was immensely proud of that paper, since I had conceived the topic entirely on my own in response to a very open-ended essay prompt. It gave me an opportunity to explore creative issues that had been preoccupying me since high school, and to take on the kind of writing and interpretive challenges that I would be facing in graduate school in just a few months' time.

I thought immediately of that essay as I was reading *The Meaningful Writing Project*, a thought-provoking book published this year and written by Michele Eodice, Anne Ellen Geller, and Neal Lerner. It includes an analysis of survey results from more than 700 undergraduates at three different institutions, who were given two prompts:

- Describe a writing project from your undergraduate education that was meaningful to you.
- Explain why it was meaningful.

The authors spent several years interpreting and categorizing the responses to those two questions. Working with a team (which included undergraduates), they supplemented their survey data by interviews with two groups: (1) a subset of the survey respondents, and (2) faculty members who had created meaningful writing assignments.

The results have tantalizing implications for those of us who design writing assignments — whatever the discipline, and whether they are for a first-year writing course or a senior seminar. After all, if we can identify the common attributes of a

meaningful writing assignment, we can presumably translate those findings into concrete ways to make all of our assessments more meaningful.

Pinpointing those concrete strategies, however, is difficult due to the sheer amount of qualitative data gathered by the team. As with any research study of this level of complexity, the findings can be messy. (Readers curious about the design and limitations of the study can learn more about the guts of it at the authors' website, where they also hope to collect additional responses about meaningful writing projects.)

With those qualifiers in mind, the book ultimately makes a convincing case for three core attributes of a meaningful assignment. All three were mentioned again and again in the survey results and interviews. They are qualities we should keep in mind as we try to design assessments that our students will find — you guessed it — meaningful:

1. Give students a say. The most meaningful assignments offer students a sense of agency. Many of the projects described in the survey afforded students "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."

That sense of agency took many forms — it wasn't just about offering open-ended prompts that allow students complete freedom to follow their own inclinations. In fact, some students in the survey pointed to writing projects that struck a balance between freedom and structure. "The paper itself was a research paper on a topic we got to choose," wrote one student. "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."

2. Engage them actively, not passively. In a passive writing assignment, students write on their own, using content from class or their own research, and then turn in a finished paper. In the most meaningful assignments cited in the survey, students were far more interactive *during* the writing process — with their instructor, their peers, and the content.

This category is the most slippery of the three — it's almost too broadly defined in the book to offer clear takeaways to those of us who want to design effective writing projects.

But once the authors begin to describe specific examples of "engagement," the picture becomes clearer, and looks an awful lot like what composition theorists have been recommending for decades: Students get feedback on multiple drafts from the instructor; they evaluate one another's drafts in peer-review sessions; they interview sources or do research on the topic outside of class; they connect the project to their personal experiences or write for a specific audience, real or imagined.

3. Make sure it transfers. The elusive goal of every college instructor is to create learning that transfers — i.e., learning that students can carry from the context in which they originally learned it and apply it to new questions, problems, and challenges.

The authors of *The Meaningful Writing Project* saw two types of transfer in the writing assignments mentioned in their data. First were projects that facilitated what the authors called "transfer in" — meaning, a project in which students could apply their prior learning experiences to a new writing assignment.

Second, and far more commonly cited in the surveys, were writing projects that promised "transfer out" — that is, students found the work meaningful because they believed it would help them develop skills they would need in the future. Close to 70 percent of the surveyed students agreed that "their meaningful writing projects would

transfer to future writing." I remember this as one of the hallmarks of my undergraduate seminar paper, too. I was practicing the kind of long, critical analyses that I imagined would be required of me in graduate school.

The Meaningful Writing Project does not argue that every writing assignment must contain some premixed combination of agency, engagement, and transfer potential. "Look closely," the authors recommend instead, "for the places where aspects of a writing assignment can be made more expansive, more inviting, more past connected, and more future-oriented in ways driven by students' goals and interests."

In other words, as we prepare a new writing assignment — either on our own or with our students' input — we should try expanding it in one of the three directions the book articulates.

I read the book this semester, which was timely as I'm teaching first-year composition. The course has a theme of community-engaged learning, which means that my students and I are partnering with a local nonprofit organization that needed written material for its website. The organization's needs matched up nicely with the kinds of work that students typically undertake in composition courses, such as writing profile essays or arguments supported by research.

While planning the course this past summer, I'd already thought long and hard about how I could make my students' work meaningful. But this book still opened my eyes to some ways in which I could view my assignments more expansively, especially with respect to supporting the agency of my students.

Just after I finished reading it, I sat down to write the assignment sheet for the research essays students will be producing for the organization. As my fingers were poised above the keyboard, I thought about *The Meaningful Writing Project* and decided to make a change. Instead of drawing up a detailed assignment sheet, I wrote up the learning objectives I had in mind, and then showed them to my students in class.

"Here are the skills this assignment is supposed to help you develop," I said. "I want you to think about what the organization needs from us, and help me decide what form this essay should take."

The students looked at me with curiosity, and then tentatively began offering suggestions. After we agreed on the shape of the essays, we discussed the topics: Should everyone choose their own? Or should we focus on a smaller number of them? The former option would give students full freedom of choice; the latter would be more helpful to the organization.

Their opinion charted a middle course — like the one identified in *The Meaningful Writing Project* — between guidance and boundaries. Instead of overwhelming the organization with research on 18 different topics, we decided to brainstorm on a handful of research areas that would benefit the organization.

"Once we've identified those topics," I asked the class, "do you want me to put you in groups and assign each of you a topic, or do you want to select them yourselves?"

"Let us pick them," called out a student. "If we pick topics we're interested in, we're going to write better papers."

Yes, I thought, you probably will. You might even write the kind of paper that will end up someday in a yellow folder in your basement — and when you pull it out and review it in your middle age, you might still remember why it mattered to you.

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