Students' Meaningful Writing Experiences at a Women's University in Bangladesh: Pilot Study

Institutional Description

The Asian University for Women (AUW) is located in Chittagong, Bangladesh and was founded in 2008. Unique among universities in the region, AUW's curriculum is based on an American liberal arts model. AUW has approximately 500 students from 15 countries across South Asia, Southeast Asia and the Middle East. Many students are the first women in their communities to attend university. Most students receive a partial or full scholarship to attend. According to their website, AUW seeks to produce graduates who will "use their understanding, self-esteem, and leadership skills towards women's empowerment in all aspects of society" ("About Us").

To fulfill graduation requirements, undergraduates are required to take a first-year composition course, two writing seminars and at least two writing-intensive (WI) undergraduate courses. AUW also has a writing center which supports students in all writing-related projects. Many students also pursue large-scale writing projects for independent Summer Projects or Senior Thesis papers, both often involving IRB-approved fieldwork. Given the emphasis on writing at the university, I aim to explore ways in which final-year undergraduate (UG4) students describe meaningful writing experiences both inside and outside the classroom over the course of their undergraduate careers.

Key Works & Concepts

In the ***Meaningful Writing Project***, Michele Eodice, Anne Ellen Geller and Neal Lerner surveyed students in found that writing assignments were most meaningful when students could make direct connections to their past experiences, present lives and future aspirations. They seek to discover "the meaning students find in what they write, as well as what they do with that meaning, i.e., how those writing tasks affect their growing sense of who they have been, who they are, or who they will be." Importantly, their study places "student writing in the center as a meaning-making activity and draws from students themselves the elements that might contribute to that meaning making" (Eodice et al., "Study Design"). In its initial stages, my study seeks to apply similar research questions & aims in a transnational context.

In thinking through my methodology, I found myself gravitating toward **Teresa Lillis**' notion of "**long conversations**" and the value of emic perspectives achieved through familiarity with respondents. If we can have "long conversations," we may obtain more nuanced accounts of writers' perspectives, allowing for "more specific and/or complex understanding[s] of what is significant to writers at a specific moment in time, in their specific sociohistoric writing trajectories" (Lillis 363). Additionally, Lillis forwards a **writer-focused approach** that recognizes that "the participants' analytic lens and perspectives are central to establishing what may be significant and important in any specific context" (Lillis 359). As I continue to develop this study, I am interested in solidifying this writer-focused approach to make sure respondents' perspectives remain central to the findings and are represented accurately.

Note: I would appreciate feedback on potentially fruitful *theoretical* frames I can use to analyze my data once the study is expanded to include more participants. Based on my findings from this preliminary pilot study, I can envision the project's focus going in several different directions based on the theoretical frame(s) applied. I would like to hear what directions seem the most promising/intriguing to an audience of transnational scholars.

Glossary

AUW – Asian University for Women

Students' Meaningful Writing Experiences at a Women's University in Bangladesh

Introduction

> You don't have to be an angel, you don't have to be an extraordinary daughter …you are who you are. You don't have to wait until you become the queen or the king for you to write your autobiography. Everyone can write about their life. And this is the reason why I think we need to know to write.
>
> - Moe Moe

In their study looking at students' meaningful writing experiences across three North American institutions, Michele Eodice, Anne Ellen Geller and Neal Lerner found that writing assignments were most meaningful when students could make direct connections to their past experiences, present lives and future aspirations. This current pilot study aims to contribute an international perspective to our understandings of students' writing experiences by examining perceptions of meaningful writing experiences among final-year students at the Asian University for Women (AUW), an English-medium international women's university in Bangladesh.

To fulfill graduation requirements, AUW undergraduates are required to take a first-year composition course, two writing seminars and at least two writing-intensive (WI) undergraduate courses. Many students also pursue large-scale writing projects for independent Summer Projects or Senior Thesis papers, both often involving IRB-approved fieldwork and data collection. AUW also has a writing center which provides support for students in all writing-related projects. Given the significant emphasis on writing at the university, in this study I aim to explore ways in which final-year undergraduate (UG4) students describe memorable writing experiences both inside and outside the classroom over the course of their undergraduate careers. In this pilot study, I conducted open-ended interviews with three final-year AUW students. When expanded to include more participants, findings of this study may allow us to better understand multilingual student-writers' experiences in English-medium higher education institutions

worldwide and to contribute to a growing body of literature on transnational writing programs (Martins). My primary research questions were as follows:

- What writing experiences inside the classroom were most meaningful for AUW final-year students?
- What writing experiences outside the classroom (summer projects, internships, etc.) were most meaningful for AUW final-year students?
- How do meaningful writing experiences play a role in students' perceptions of personal agency and post-grad preparedness? Specifically, how do students perceive and describe their writing skills in relation to their hopes, plans, and concerns regarding post-grad life?
- What are the implications for writing instructors and WPAs in transnational writing programs?

Rationale for Methodology

According to Merriam, qualitative researchers are "interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (5). As opposed to methods with positivist foundations, which assume that a single "truth" exists, more postmodern or post-structural frameworks emphasize the importance of the acknowledgement and inclusion of a range of perspectives and interpretations on any given phenomenon. According to Cresswell, "meanings are varied and multiple, leading the researcher to look for the complexity of views…they are not simply imprinted on individuals but are formed through interaction with others (hence social constructivism) and through historical and cultural norms that operate in individuals' lives" (qtd. in Merriam 9). This present study relies on qualitative methods to obtain participants' self-reports of their own perceptions and understandings.

In this pilot study, I interviewed a small number of students. My findings are not meant to be representative of all AUW final-year students, or of multilingual students in English-medium transnational institutions of higher education. Dressman & McCarthey clarify, "case studies are not about causality or generalizability" (451). Although case studies do not have predictive power, because the primary aim is to understand a particular individual or setting in a particular context, case studies are still highly valuable in that they may allow us to "reconceptualiz[e] the dynamics of a system and for generating hypotheses about a generalized phenomenon [more] than the positivist traditions of experimentalism" (Dressman 451). In other words, case studies can help us generate more research questions, which will then allow us to refine our focus and study aims.

In case studies, readers may interpret research findings with each participant's social, cultural, religious, political, educational backgrounds in mind, which may result in overgeneralizations and have the "negative practical consequence of reifying stereotypes" (Dressman 453). However, this can be avoided if the researcher offers a thoughtful analysis in which they consider all the dimensions of participants' plural identities. In this present study, since interviews were semi-structured and open ended, participants were invited to reflect on their experiences in whatever ways they themselves found the most meaningful. I chose to conduct semi-structured interviews in order to prompt open discussions with participants and to allow them to bring up themes or topics that they find significant, which may not have been included in the original questions I prepared. The open-ended nature of the interview format allowed room for unexpected perspectives and sentiments regarding the role of writing education in students' senses of preparedness and personal agency.

Site and Participants

AUW was founded in 2008 and developed its curriculum based on an American liberal arts model. AUW has approximately 500 students from 15 countries across South Asia, Southeast Asia and the Middle East. Many students are the first women in their communities to attend university and receive a full scholarship to attend AUW. The university seeks to produce graduates who will "use their understanding, self-esteem, and leadership skills towards women's empowerment in all aspects of society" ("About Us"). Thus, women's empowerment is central to AUW's vision, and English academic writing instruction is central to the curriculum.

The Asian University for Women was chosen as the research site for this study because of my prior work experience at the institution from 2013-2016. During my time at AUW, I worked as a writing center tutor, teaching assistant, writing center coordinator and first-year composition instructor. My work roles allowed me to become intimately familiar with student writing at AUW, and the writing program as a whole. Having worked extensively with students one-on-one on class assignments, senior thesis papers, research studies, cover letters and many other forms of writing, and having already had countless conversations with students *about* writing, I was confident that interviewing AUW students for this study would result in valuable insights and reflections about meaningful writing experiences at the undergraduate level.

Due to the qualitative nature of this study, and because it was not my aim to generalize results, the method of choosing study participants was non-probabilistic sampling (Merriam 77). Study participants were chosen through purposive sampling, which is based on the assumption that the "investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned (Merriam 77). The general selection criteria used to choose participants in this study were as follows: 1) participants must be currently enrolled as

final-year undergraduate students at AUW, and 2) participants must have completed one year of Language and Composition in Access Academy, two semesters of undergraduate writing seminars and at least two semesters of writing-intensive courses.

Based on these criteria, I invited to participate in my study were students I have worked with closely in the past. The type of purposive sampling for this study was thus a combination of convenience sampling and "unique" sampling, which involves choosing participants based on unique attributes related to the research topic (Merriam 78). In this case, the participants I selected were "unique" in that they were all Politics, Philosophy and Economics (PPE) majors and frequent visitors to the writing center. These factors make these participants "unique" in that they are engaging in more writing tasks compared to students of other majors (such as Computer Science or Biology) and are regularly reflecting on their own writing processes and concerns during their meetings with writing center tutors. Furthermore, I was prompted to reach out to these students in particular because I was familiar with their level of commitment in improving their academic English writing skills and their demonstrated capacity to reflect on and discuss their own writing processes thoughtfully. I was motivated to invite these students not only because I believed they would provide insightful responses, but also because I felt they would appreciate and benefit from this opportunity for self-reflection.

Researcher Role

There is a need for researchers to be explicit about their positionality as researchers, particularly in writing studies. Researchers "should be aware of a methodology's limitations, make explicit our practices and stance" (Sheridan 79) in order to allow readers to understand the full context in which the research was conducted. Crafting a final written document that selectively omits the messy aspects of research not only fails to give readers the full picture, but reduces the richness

of the data. I take this opportunity to reflect on my role as a researcher in this particular study, to disclose my unique positioning which shaped my capacity to collect data and the nature of the data itself.

As previously mentioned, the study site I chose is a university I worked at for three and a half academic years. When designing this study, my research questions were influenced by my knowledge of the study site and student population, as well as my curiosity to know more about a particular aspect of student experiences with writing. My extensive experience having conversations with students one-on-one about their academic and personal lives, their hopes and concerns allowed me to go into the study with the confidence that my interviews would give rise to analyzable data. My familiarity with the research site and participants has also shaped my data analysis process. In analyzing my findings, I found myself drawing from my knowledge of the academic institution, curriculum, and students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds. My insider status and knowledge of context allowed me to locate my participants' perspectives within broader social, cultural, educational contexts.

Teresa Lillis notes that emic perspectives are valuable in understanding what is meaningful and important to the participants, and recommends "long conversations" between researchers and writers for the data collection process. These long conversations can give rise to more nuanced accounts of writers' perspectives so that researchers can contextualize their findings and have a "more specific and/or complex understanding of what is significant to writers at a specific moment in time, in their specific sociohistoric writing trajectories" (Lillis 363). In this present study, as a researcher I contextualize my interviews within the ongoing "long conversation" I have had with my study participants over the last three years. From the perspective of my participants, I was not so much an outside "researcher" than someone they

have worked with extensively on various writing projects. I believe my participants also felt that these interviews were part of an ongoing, long conversation with a former tutor, mentor and work-study supervisor.

As some scholars have pointed out, certain studies, particularly classroom ethnographies, "privileg[e] academic theories, not the theories of student cultures" (Rhodes qtd. in Sheridan 81). As Lillis states, it is important that the "researcher adopts an openness to writer-insider's comments, perspectives, and discourses, whether or not these relate to a research focus (textual or otherwise) predefined by the researcher" (360). Accordingly, I went into this study with only vague notions of possible narratives that might emerge from interview data; I conducted interviews with a mindset of curiosity, more than one of expectation.

Data Collection

Participants were initially contacted through email with a brief overview of the research study and an invitation to participate in IRB-approved interviews via Skype. All three participants responded within 24 hours to express that they would be willing to be interviewed. Interview times were arranged while accounting for the time difference and days of the week (in Bangladesh, weekends are Friday-Saturday). In addition, preamble consent forms were sent to participants through email, which relieved participants of the burden of signing, scanning and emailing signed consent forms back to me. Interview questions were also provided in an email to give participants the option of reading them over the interview. Participants were provided an opportunity to state their preferences for how they would like identifying information to be handled in any final reports; all participants requested that their real names to be used rather than pseudonyms.

Two interviews were conducted via Skype, while the third interview was conducted via Google Hangouts at the participant's request. Overall, due to patchy internet connectivity, the sound quality was extremely poor, and calls were dropped multiple times during each of the interviews. However, despite interruptions, interviews did not go over 60 minutes, and the audio recordings were good enough to transcribe from. Interviews were recorded with an audio recording application on a cell phone. Audio files were broken up into 10-minute segments to make the transcription process easier. Based on notes I took during the interview roughly indicating times when certain topics were discussed, I transcribed only portions of the interviews which were most relevant to the research questions. Due to the informal and open-ended nature of the interviews, some parts of the interviews were more conversational and tangential to the research topic, or regarding participants' personal lives. I did not transcribe these portions of the interviews.

Data Analysis Procedures

Smagorinsky stresses the importance of researchers being clear about data reduction methods, noting that studies "often involve selectively chosen data designed more to confirm a researcher's preconceived thesis than to mine the data exhaustively to understand what they suggest or reveal" (397). In other words, findings are sometimes skewed and biased through reducing data by omitting portions that do not support the researcher's anticipated or preferred results. In this study, due to my small sample size (three hour-long interviews), data reduction was not a significant part of the data analysis process. Rather, I took note of all major themes that came up in each of the interviews and included them in my analysis. The only portions of the interviews that were omitted entirely were times when the dialogue occasionally switched over to personal conversation.

Since interviews were open-ended and I was not setting out to support a specific hypothesis, I treated all responses as valuable and meaningful reflections of how my participants perceived their identities as writers and their relationship with academic/nonacademic writing. Once interview transcripts were typed up, I took note of major themes, which helped in "forming a picture" (Blakeslee and Fleischer 174). I then re-immersed myself in the data to find more specific categories within the major themes. The process was recursive in the sense that the discovery of certain categories prompted me to adjust or reconfigure major themes. As Blakeslee and Fleischer explain, the "initial categories you develop will give you a way to look at the material, but re-immersing yourself in your findings may reveal additional or different categories," after which it is important to consider "what a new look into the material will tell you and how you can restructure your categories to better fit the information" (175).

For this process of immersing myself in the data to find themes and categories, I repeatedly listened to the recorded audio of the interviews. Though it is often recommended that the researcher read and reflect on interview transcripts repeatedly to become deeply familiar with the data (Blakeslee and Fleischer 172), I found that listening to the audio provided details regarding my participants' affective states, or emotional cues which could not be captured in my simple transcripts such as intonation, speaking speed, pitch and loudness. Leander and Prior acknowledge that these sorts of meaningful speech patterns are often omitted in transcription: "no system of transcription can capture everything that is happening" (214). My transcriptions were straightforward and did not contain an elaborate system of punctuation marks representing non-verbal cues, because for this particular study I simply wanted to focus on verbal content. To make up for the lack of detail in the transcripts, I listened to the audio recordings primarily in order to still consider non-verbal speech patterns when formulating my themes.

Findings

The three major themes that arose from my interviews regarding students' meaningful writing experiences were personal resonance, preparedness and transfer, and future agency. When asked to reflect on meaningful writing experiences both inside and outside the classroom, all three participants spoke about writing projects that had personal resonance in some way. Participants also discussed perceptions of preparedness and potential for transfer across academia and "real-world" contexts in post-graduate life. When asked to discuss their hopes and concerns for the future in general, participants responded with visions of themselves as future writers and agentive change-makers. As I highlight below, participants' reflections on meaningful experiences overlapped in interesting ways.

Meaningful Writing and Personal Resonance

All three participants mentioned creative writing as the most memorable for-class writing experience in their undergraduate careers, noting that they appreciated the opportunity to write about topics they felt personally connected to. Moe Moe's response reflects her preference for the sense of freedom creative writing assignments gave her:

> [In the creative writing class] I have a chance to develop ideas and make a creation mixed with my real events and also fiction, kind of, so it gave me a chance to develop my ideas and explore the ideas. I could write freely. There's no restrictions. Because some papers, the professor is very strict. You have to go this this this. Even though it's a writing class, there are restrictions. Sometimes we have to follow the rules: "No that is wrong, this way." Instead of guiding, they put students into the boundaries and give pressure, so we cannot explore the ideas. So I prefer creative writing.

The way Moe Moe describes her creative writing class as an opportunity to "write freely" with "no restrictions," compared to other classes in which she had to "follow the rules" and held within "boundaries" reveals a clear distinction between her experiences with creative versus academic writing. There is an emphasis on the opportunity for, or lack of opportunity for

exploration of ideas, which Moe Moe appears to value as a key aspect of what makes writing meaningful. The other two participants also mentioned creative writing, poetry, and a religion paper as their most meaningful writing experiences, citing the similar reasons.

Outside of the classroom, participants talked about various writing projects they encountered outside of the university setting, all of which also had some kind of personal resonance. Chit reflected on a research assistantship position with an Asian Studies professor in Japan, noting that the position allowed her to conduct research on issues about her home country, Burma:

> Basically I had to find articles for him related to LGBT rights, politics, so he gave the topic and we had to search on that topic and then we had to summarize the articles, analyze the articles and then send them back to him, those summaries. Sometimes I had to translate Burmese articles. He wanted the real articles, articles written in Burmese, because sometimes Burmese article information is different from English. I really liked the job because I really liked to work on that topic. I found a lot of information about my country.

Chit seems to find this research opportunity meaningful in that she acted as a translator for her supervisor, and also in that she was able to learn more about her home country and culture.

Ly Chhay also described a meaningful writing experience outside of the classroom that had resonance on a personal level. She offers a reflection on her experience working on a personal statement for a summer program in the United States, to which she was accepted:

> We wrote together, I went to you many times, the Hansen Summer Institute. It's like I can imagine myself through the writing. I worked on that application maybe three or four months. It took all my heart and soul. It feels like I tried to make every single sentence perfect, and it's all about my personal stories…Everything is about how I grew up and then challenges, and overcoming them, the misconceptions, the stereotypes between cultures, how I want to make change. That's meaningful to me, and I'm realizing how important it is to just edit, edit, edit and go through peer review because that has been the most helpful thing for me, and the writing center.

Ly Chhay describes the task of writing this personal statement as a time-consuming yet rewarding experience that took all her "heart and soul," reflecting both how much she desired to participate in the program as well as how she valued the opportunity to work on a piece of writing in which she could tell her "personal stories." She emphasizes the personal statement as a writing experience which allowed her to reflect on and tell stories about her life experiences, while simultaneously emphasizing the essay as a writing experience in which she was able to practice various writing skills such as sentence-level editing ("I tried to make every single sentence perfect") and receiving feedback from others (peer review, the writing center). The writing experience was meaningful in that it allowed self-reflection and identity formation, both personally and as a writer.

Moe Moe reflects on a writing experience she remembers from an internship with a Malaysian NGO which required her to translate documents from English to Burmese, her first language. Moe Moe articulates how the activity of translation was meaningful for her:

> I think it's another way of learning, not just to do research. Before that, I thought reading and thinking and doing different types of research would be the only way that I can learn new things. But after doing translation, I thought, no, actually, I'm learning a lot, because I have to think before I have to type in my own words. My own words. It's a kind of paraphrasing. When I do research, I just think in English. English to English. But in translation, I read it, and then I type it into my own words, in Burmese. If people ask me what the whole chapter was about, I can almost get everything, because I had to read so engaged, and so focused. I remember it more.

Moe Moe recognizes translation as "another way of learning" compared to traditional class research papers, and breaks down her internal thought process while translating from English to Burmese, which she describes as a "kind of paraphrasing." Moe Moe articulates how translation is more work-intensive than traditional writing assignments that do not entail translation ("I *just* think in English"). She also notes that the careful sentence-level attention required in translation

resulted in a greater capacity to retain information she translated. Her response reflects how translation was meaningful for her because it provided a new way of learning, writing, and thinking about writing. Moe Moe elaborates with the following:

> It's another way of writing. It's like if someone who is blind, you have to explain them what actually to see. So English, for someone who doesn't speak English, you have to explain yourself in really clear sentences…It can improve your writing structure. When it comes to writing, what I believe is that it doesn't matter if you are writing in Japanese or Karen or Burmese or Thai or English, you need to make yourself in a clear structure to explain to your audience. Because it doesn't matter who you are speaking with, the main thing is that you have to explain yourself to your audience. If you have two or three languages, and then you reflect on yourself, actually what in English does this mean. You will reflect. And yes, I think it will help you to write better, or easier. More simply.

Here, Moe Moe explains how doing translation work can improve writing skills more generally, across languages, particularly in that translation requires the writer to reflect carefully on how to convey ideas clearly to an audience. She expresses her belief that translation would be a useful exercise even in the classroom because it helped her practice thinking about audience in other writing tasks.

When asked to reflect on meaningful writing experiences both in and out of the classroom, all three participants talked about writing that they had some sort of personal connection to, whether it be the ability to delve into a topic related to their home culture, native languages or their personal life experiences. I believe this is partly because all three participants have essentially been studying abroad for the past four years – Moe Moe, Chit and Ly Chhay are from Myanmar, Thailand and Cambodia, respectively. It is understandable that non-Bangladeshi AUW students may find particular comfort and meaning in writing assignments that allow them to reconnect with their home cultures. Their descriptions of meaningful writing experiences thus appear to relate directly to ongoing processes of self-reflection and identity formation.

Meaningful Writing and Transfer

The issue of transfer came up in all interviews, though not brought up by me or addressed explicitly. The transferability of writing skills from the university setting to post-graduate life did not seem to be a major concern for my participants; rather, they reflect on their writing experiences as valuable in and of themselves. Ly Chhay reflects on all the work she has put in to writing various personal statements to apply for internships and jobs:

> It's meaningful to me because I completed it. It doesn't mean that I don't value the things that I didn't get admitted to, because I do learn a lot from them, even the applications that I didn't get to be admitted. Because it's like writing related to personal sentiments, it's about collecting my personal thoughts and like just collecting about me, and so I do use them. I wish I even write more. It's not about which part might not be meaningful to me, I just value everything I write.

Ly Chhay reveals here that each internship/job application is meaningful as an opportunity for self-reflection, which she sees as inherently valuable, regardless of the outcome. In this excerpt, she seems to place more emphasis on writing as an opportunity for personal growth than as a skill set that leads to certain external rewards.

All participants reflected positively on how writing instruction at AUW provided a solid foundation for them to pursue writing projects outside of the university setting. Rather than expressing an expectation that writing in the classroom would and should prepare them for writing outside of the university setting, participants acknowledge that the vast number of genres and styles of writing makes it difficult, if not impossible to be completely prepared as undergraduate students. For Chit, being a final-year student allowed her to experience different types of writing to apply for various positions: "this year I wrote a lot. I wrote many personal statements, cover letters, resumes. I got to know different kinds of writing styles, like for example, how to write a cover letter for internship, or how to write a cover letter for a job." Moe Moe further elaborates on her experience learning about different genres of writing and perceptions of preparedness:

> I think there are so many different types of writing. As a student of course I learned how to write a good research paper and express myself. But there are so many other different types of writing that I'm not familiar with yet. I think different types of universities, different types of companies, NGOs, they all have different formats. I can learn anyway. I already know how to write, and how to do research and how to put my thoughts, and I believe I am prepared to write in a way that they want. I think we can't really prepare at the university for different types of writing, because different countries, different institutions, they have their own different way. And from my side, I feel that I'm kind of lucky, because I've been involved with different types of companies, different types of NGOs, different types of writing. I experienced a little bit, and I'm okay with that, and I can learn. I can learn more. But I already know how to learn.

Moe Moe reflects on the writing instruction she has received at AUW as having provided her with foundational research and writing skills that have taught her "how to learn," but also feels "lucky" to have had jobs and internships that have broadened her exposure to different genres. She acknowledges the sheer range of different types of writing, noting differences along cultural and institutional lines, and expresses some doubt that any undergraduate curriculum could prepare students for all writing tasks they may be faced with after graduation. Moe Moe's work and internship experience in various countries in southeast and south Asia has perhaps contributed to her awareness of various cultures of writing.

When asked about how prepared she feels about writing outside the university classroom setting, Ly Chhay similarly expresses confidence regarding writing tasks she may face in post-graduate work environments, stating, "it's okay, like as long as I go through editing many times and stuff, that's okay for me…I can draft it, I can move it around." Having had writing experiences that involved many stages of receiving feedback and revising, Ly Chhay finds comfort in her understanding of writing as a process. Writing, to her, is not about what one can singlehandedly produce on the spot, but is rather a collaborative process involving multiple stages of revision and editing. This notion contributes to her apparent confidence regarding her preparedness for writing tasks in post-graduate life.

Meaningful Writing and Future Agency

When asked about their hopes and concerns about the future, all participants mentioned their desire to eventually use their writing in order to inspire others and promote positive change. Their responses, to varying degrees, seem to reflect a belief in the power of writing to prompt change in people and society. Participants contextualized their writing experiences thus far as a part of a long-term goal to someday inspire others through writing. Ly Chhay reflects, "beside my personal interest in traveling and understanding the world and getting to know more people and getting to know more people, I want to also inspire people in my country…my aim will be helping other people." She also reviewed her life thus far in terms of how she might organize an autobiography, with each chapter representing a distinct phase in her life – chapter one, finishing high school in Cambodia; chapter two, university life in Bangladesh, etc. She expresses her desire to someday write an autobiography:

> Every individual is so interesting. So what about a book? That is also a way I can become a leader. Because I have read [books by] almost every big leader that I am a fan of. That's how they frame their thoughts and ideas deeply and what they really want to say, how they view the world and what they want to do.

Chit also describes her goal of someday writing a book as an academic. She says, "I want to develop myself. I still want to learn about politics and write about my country. Like a scholar. Actually, politics is very complex. I still want to learn and write a very good paper." She recognizes that she still has a lot to learn but hopes to someday pursue graduate school and become a leading scholar in Burmese politics. Both Ly Chhay and Chit express their desire to write a book – an autobiography and a scholarly work, respectively – and seem to describe this as a sort of culminating achievement that would enable them to be leaders in their communities/countries.

Moe Moe, similar to Ly Chhay, also expresses her desire to someday write an autobiography, and portrays the act of writing an autobiography as a major reason to advocate for writing instruction:

> Every single individual should learn how to write. Because writing is the only thing that will last forever, if you have good thoughts…People pay so much attention to you – they stop listening to music, they stop looking at the environment, they put all their concentration, their thoughts, their spiritual concentration to your writing. Then this is how we actually change people's ideologies, their thoughts for life, their beliefs.

Moe Moe lends a significant amount of power to the written word, stating that writing has the capacity to not only capture the attention of an audience, but to change their ideologies. She further elaborates on the materiality of a book as playing a role in the power of writing:

> I have a dream, a kind of hope for my life… I want to write my autobiography. Because I have talked in front of 3000 people, I was giving a speech. But those people, at that moment, their minds were busy with other things, with their business, with their boyfriend, with their phones. They would not get my point. I write about it – and when they hold my book, and when they read it, they will have more patience. So this is why I want to write. Instead of giving a speech or a talk. They will take the book in the plane, in the washroom, or they take the book to the beach. You are with them. You are not physically with them, but you are kind of spiritually with them.

Her depiction of the book being carried around by people going about their lives reflects her perception of the book being mobile and physically present, whereas speech is ephemeral and transient. In her comparison between giving a speech and writing a book, it appears she sees writing as a more effective means of effecting change and inspiring others. She also explains her belief that everyone has a unique story to tell, stating that "I have read so many stories, other people's stories and many of them are extra - ordinary. They are just one of us. So my understanding was you just have to share your ideas, you just have to share your feelings, your experiences." Moe Moe shares her belief that writing allows you to "be a part of history, no matter who you are, or where you are."

When asked about future goals, all participants responded in terms of their future goals as writers – specifically, they described their desire to write a book. Moe Moe, Chit and Ly Chhay all come from small communities in which they were among, if not the first women to pursue higher education. They have taken advantage of study abroad programs and internship opportunities both in Bangladesh and other countries, gaining valuable professional development experiences. Like many other AUW students, they have seen the effects of their academic pursuits in their home communities – for example, more families are deciding to allow their daughters to pursue higher education. Motivated by these small-scale changes, many AUW students are passionate about women's education and work toward inspiring others to support women's education with their personal stories. Within this context, it is fascinating to see how Moe Moe, Chit and Ly Chhay view writing a book as a means of inspiring others beyond their local communities. Despite their experience traveling and working internationally, visa freedom is constantly an issue AUW students face – students often get accepted to incredible opportunities abroad, only to be rejected by visa offices for no apparent reason. It is understandable, then, that Moe Moe, Chit and Ly Chhay perceive writing – through the medium of books – to be mobile in a way they are not. They imagine their future agency and capacity to invoke positive change as intimately tied to their identities as writers.

Summary and Discussion

It has been noted that within writing studies, "too often, educational "ethnographies" focus on deficiencies of students, offering moralistic evaluations instead of descriptive assessments" (Rhodes qtd. in Sheridan 81). I believe it is of particular importance that this be avoided in future research conducted in transnational contexts. Instead, we should continue to attempt to employ a writer-focused approach that which "recognizes that the participants' analytic lens and

perspectives are central to establishing what may be significant and important in any specific context" (Lillis 359). This pilot study sought to record what three final-year AUW students described as meaningful writing experiences, both inside and outside the classroom. Respondents talked about writing experiences that had personal resonance, whether because the subject matter dealt with their academic interests, home countries, native languages or allowed them to write about personal experiences. Overall, participants in this study recognized writing instruction received at AUW as providing them with foundational writing skills which have enabled them to adapt to different writing projects outside of the university. They feel prepared in the sense that writing is a process, and that with any writing project they face in future workplaces they can seek feedback and go through many stages of revision. In terms of agency and future plans, all participants shared their hopes to someday write books: two expressed interest in writing an autobiography to inspire others, and one described her goal of continuing research and publishing academic scholarly work. My findings also revealed specific themes that could be further pursued in different studies using AUW as a research site; for example, multilingual students' experiences with and perceptions of translation, and students' perceptions of books, publishing and intellectual mobility.

This study was limited in that it had a very small sample size but served well as an initial pilot study. Due to time constraints, and due to the fact that interviews could not take place on site, my capacity to collect data was also limited. For future interviews, I will conduct follow-up interviews with all participants to review my analyses and ask them to elaborate on certain points of interest. Contextualizing my findings further will to allow the reader to obtain a more nuanced picture of how participants' responses fit in to their broader life trajectories as students and writers. Furthermore, a more in-depth profile of AUW's writing program will perhaps allow

readers to potentially draw comparisons between similar transnational writing programs. Despite limitations, this study has provided me a preliminary foundation to expand on. The richness of responses gathered in this small-scale, brief study indicates that increasing the sample size would give rise to a range of other insights from AUW students about meaningful writing experiences, which may have compelling implications for WPAs and instructors of writing in transnational academic contexts.

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Interview Questions (semi-structured)

Background

1. Where did you grow up?
2. What was your primary/secondary education like, with respect to English language education and writing instruction?
3. What prompted you to apply to AUW?
4. What is your major/minor?

Writing Experiences at AUW

Please reflect on writing-rich courses you've taken at AUW (Language & Composition, Writing Seminars, Writing-intensive courses) and projects (Summer Project, Senior Thesis, etc.)

1. Which writing course(s) and/or assignments were the most meaningful for you, and why?
2. Which writing project(s) (Summer Project, thesis, etc.) were the most meaningful for you, and why?
3. Can you think of any other writing experience(s), either inside or outside the classroom that have been the most meaningful for you? Why?
4. What has been the most challenging aspect(s) of writing at AUW?
5. What are the most helpful forms of feedback you have gotten on your writing?
6. Any additional thoughts or comments?

Looking into the Future

1. What are your general plans for post-graduation?
2. To what extend do you think the writing skills you acquired at AUW will help in your post-graduate life?
3. Any additional thoughts, comments or concerns?