

New Directions in Teaching Memoir
A Studio Workshop Approach

Dawn Latta Kirby
Dan Kirby

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Studio-style Teaching

In Chapter 1, we introduced you to Contemporary Memoir (CM) and described its unique features and the appropriateness of using that emerging genre to engage and energize student writers. In this chapter, we make the case for the marriage of CM and studio pedagogy. Much of our past teaching, even in writing workshop mode, has required that we assume the roles of assignment designer and writing task manager. Teaching CM well requires that we explore new, more complex roles as teachers, roles beyond merely assigning work, responding to papers, and grading that work. We find that a coachlike stance and a supportive environment are essential to cultivate the birth of our students' life stories. In this chapter, we explore a richer, more complex metaphor for creating a unique environment for memoir study.

Tenets for Teaching Contemporary Memoir

When we teach CM, we ask our students to construct narrative versions of their lives, to remember events and people from their past, and to invent additional detail and dialog as necessary. We ask them to consider the "So what?" of their remembered stories. As we discuss in detail in Chapter 6, the "So what" idea is a direct way of capturing student writers' intentions and of asking them to consider how their life events and meanings will resonate with readers. Barbara's parents divorced when she was ten; why will readers want to hear about that part of her life? What did she learn as a result, how does she now view marriage and family, and what character traits developed within her as a result of her experience? In short, your parents divorced; so, what's the resulting personal learning, and how can you share that insight with an audience?

When we teach CM, we also ask students to come to some understanding of why they remember specific events, people, and places, and what those remembrances tell

them about who they are now. When we teach CM, we are upping the ante for our students' writing, asking them to take more risks and assume more authorial responsibility for their final products. Doing so requires us to accept the fact that these are our students' life stories, and that they may often be quite personal and unique. That's part of the point; in order to resonate with readers, student writers will strive to find experiences that stand out in some manner, that speak of their individual lives and perspectives, and that sound a familiar—but not trite—chord with an audience.

Memoir writing requires that students write about their lived experiences, which they know far better than we. We can neither tell our student writers exactly how these stories should go nor what meanings they should ultimately make of them. That's because the knowledge of their experiences resides within our students, not with us as omniscient teachers. Therefore, to teach memoir writing well, we have found that we cannot respond to these writings in the same manner that we might respond to their expository pieces. Life stories are too close to the bone—the student cares about them deeply—and we need to let the student writer work a while on discovering meaning and on communicating that meaning to an audience. It serves neither the development of the student writer nor the development of the genre of memoir for us to be prescriptive in our advice or judgmental in our criticism. Instead, we have found success by teaching memoir from a more interactive, shared, and communal stance in which we ask more questions of our student writers and give far fewer answers. We encourage them to find their own answers through writing and through rendering their stories.

Reworking Workshops

We suspect that many of you reading this book have used traditional writing workshops as one of the cornerstones of your writing instruction techniques. Perhaps many of you have struggled with workshop pedagogy and found it to be something less than the penicillin of writing instruction as it may have been sold to you—as have we. Certainly, you—and we—have experienced occasional magical workshop *days*, when all of your students were productive and even enthusiastic about writing in community. And there have no doubt been the occasional moments of epiphany when individual students made remarkable discoveries for themselves as writers. But many teachers tell us that productivity in their writing workshops is inconsistent, and in some classes, workshop pedagogy fails to engage any students in meaningful work. So, if traditional writing workshops aren't the key to effective writing instruction, what is? Why aren't writing workshops functioning quite so well for us instructionally? Why aren't writing workshops promoting the development of our student writers?

Reworking Work

We think that one reason that writing workshops aren't delivering more instructional and learning impact may be that for many of our students, the workshops themselves do not always provide meaningful work. Notice that we used the expression *meaning-*

ful work. Work. That word has always haunted thoughtful teachers. In the past, we—and perhaps you, too—heard ourselves saying to our students admonitions such as, “Finish your work,” “Turn in your work,” or the dreaded “You’re not working up to your abilities,” and “Some of you are just not working in this class.” The results of such pronouncements weren’t very satisfying. We were frustrated and our students often seemed unconcerned. Even though we knew writing workshop pedagogy well, even though we worked hard as teachers, went home tired most nights, and spent too many weekend hours planning workshops and minilessons and grading and responding to students’ papers, we were quite certain that we were spending far more time on our students’ papers and *work* than they were. We resolved that something essential needed to change so that students were engaged and learning and progressing. We resolved that our students needed to work productively and to work at least as hard as we were. We began experimenting, reading, studying, writing, and thinking. Now, after years of work and after dramatically changing our approaches to instructional delivery and pedagogy, we think we have some resolutions to this issue of *work* that are effective for us and for our students.

We are convinced, and have been for quite a while, that the *something* that had to change is the balance of work and responsibility in our workshops. Somehow, we had to assist and enable and maybe even demand that students take more responsibility for their own writing, that they experiment and try new ideas, and that they solve their own writing problems as they work through a piece. Naturally, we realized that mere lip service wouldn’t be effective or productive, so we set out to create instructional strategies and to reorient our thinking about pedagogical techniques so that the *work* associated with writing and writing well in our classes would become more apprentice-like, with students retaining artistic control and decision-making authority over that work, and with students assuming more responsibility for how to shape and complete their writing projects. As teachers, we set out to learn how to better mentor and coach the work of writing rather than simply assigning, managing, and regulating work like a factory supervisor.

Our Journey to the Concept of the Studio Classroom

We began this redefinition and transformation of our approaches to teaching by examining our metaphors for the act of teaching. Over the past fifteen years or so, we have spent a good deal of time searching for a metaphor that would help us redesign our writing instruction for the purpose of helping students develop as skilled writers. At the same time, we were committed to achieving a better balance of work and responsibility in our classes.

The Power of Metaphor for Redefining Teaching Pedagogy

Early in that search, we were in need of some kind of miracle insight to explain to ourselves how to accomplish such a radical reinvention of our classes. As readers of research associated with literacy, we were fully aware of the early work of Vygotsky

(1986) indicating that thought and language are reciprocal, so that what we call something affects how we think about it and the attitudes we have toward it. As literature teachers, we knew the power of metaphor in that medium. So we resolved to develop fresh metaphors for the classroom and the workshop.

Because we have been teaching for many years, we were familiar with some of the old metaphors that had been adopted by schools and teachers. There was the medical metaphor: Our students come to school with deficiencies that we *diagnose*, for which we then develop a *remedial plan* (notice the close relationship to the word *remedy*), place them in *labs*—such as reading or writing labs—to work on their skills, and then make a *prognosis* for their reentry into mainstream classes. Or, there were the factory models and the business models. Quality Based Education, a sanitary and wrong-headed notion of effective teaching, comes to mind: Specify outcomes, create tight organizational structures, monitor progress, and assess results. None of those instructional models worked too well or for too long, and none addressed the central problem we faced of redefining the role of *work* in the contemporary classroom.

After rejecting these old metaphors, we searched for a contemporary metaphor to capture a fresh view of our role as teachers and of our students' roles as workers and learners within an instructional atmosphere. Our favorite metaphor came from nature: classroom as ecosystem, a place where the environment is delicate and too much of almost anything can destroy the balance and harmony of the place—too much teacher talk, too little direction and coaching; too much structure, too little organization and modeling. Indeed, the classroom ecosystem needs a healthy balance of student and teacher work and responsibility. Once this nature metaphor occurred to us, we considered adopting a kind of hands-off philosophy, thinking of our classrooms as nature preserves where our primary responsibility would be to drive around in our Range Rovers, keeping out the poachers—such as school-mandated writing prompts designed to “teach to the state-mandated tests” in rather mindless ways, or students' aggregate writing scores that were published in the newspaper and that publicly rated us from first to last within the district based on those scores—as best we could, and checking on water supplies and the health of the—aaahhh—animals. We decided that the last part of the analogy was a bit unfortunate. Still, it had potential.

The Studio Classroom: Pedagogy and Metaphor for Teaching

It was our encounter with Donald Schön's (1987) book, *Educating the Reflective Practitioner: Toward a New Design for Teaching and Learning in the Professions*, that finally gave us a strong push in the right direction and suggested to us a rich metaphor by which we might reinvent our writing pedagogy. Schön's primary gift to us in that book was his ethnographic look at various kinds of studio-based instruction. In the book, he takes readers on a visit inside an architectural studio classroom where beginning architecture students were admonished by the studio master, “I can tell you that there is something you need to know, and with my help you may be able to learn it. But I cannot tell you what it is in a way you can now understand. I can only arrange for you to have the

right sorts of experiences for yourself. You must be willing, therefore, to have these experiences. . . . If you are unwilling to step into this new experience without knowing ahead of time what it will be like, I cannot help you. You must trust me” (93). That quote struck us as precisely the key to a new direction in teaching writing that we sought.

Schön, who was closely associated with John Dewey, also reminds us that Dewey postulated that “[s]tudents cannot be taught what they need to know, but they can be coached: They have to see on their own behalves and in their own ways the relations between means and methods employed and results achieved. Nobody else can see for them, and they can’t see just by being told, although the right kind of telling may guide this seeing and thus help them see what they need to see” (17). Those two tenets together—Schön’s on having the right experiences and Dewey’s on coaching—grounded our work and sent us in the new directions for teaching writing that we had been seeking.

But how were we to get students to pursue and even enjoy such “work”? How were we to enact these new ideas in real classrooms? We returned to the concept of *studio* from Schön.

What images does the word *studio* provoke for you? For us it is images of light, space, creative energy, works in progress, experimentation, and engrossing work. It was a metaphor that resonated for us. We wanted a classroom full of engaged students, pursuing their own work with commitment and passion.

We were absolutely taken by Schön’s idea of teaching as artistry, and we saw immediately the value of redefining our concept of writing workshop so that our classrooms could become more studio-like environments in which to teach writing. We came to understand that effective coaching requires enormous patience and adroit timing. We came to see that we were too much given to *telling* our students how to solve their writing problems. Our failing was that we had been entirely too helpful and too quick to jump into the middle of a piece of student writing. Schön’s investigations of studio instruction convinced us that studio-style teaching was an excellent fit with CM because memoir, by the very nature of the genre, will always belong to the writer.

A Brief History of the Studio Classroom: Controversy and Modern Applications

Since that encounter with Schön’s writings and throughout our work of the past decade, we have been repeatedly drawn to artists, potters, and architects both to observe them at work and to question them about the environments in which they work. We knew that studio pedagogy had been around for centuries in the arts and continues to play an important role in contemporary arts education. We began to do some research and reading about the studios and salons of Paris in the late nineteenth century. We discovered that great controversy existed even then as to how studios and studio masters should prepare aspiring artists.

The more conventional notion of the period was that novice artists should spend their time in the Louvre copying the masters whose work hung on the walls of that

famous museum. This notion, one held by many of the masters themselves, was, of course, that copying good work would develop in young artists both an aesthetic sensibility and the rudimentary skills they needed to find their place in a studio of an important artist. Others, many Impressionists among them, contended that art was about individual visions, not replication of the masters.

Obviously, these two polar opposite views of art instruction are analogous to some of the polar opposite views about writing instruction. Students were once told to read the literary masters and then write like Hemingway or Faulkner. As ideas about writing as a process entered our pedagogical conversations, we began to focus less on master writers and more on the processes of successful writers: drafting, revising, and publishing writing. The clashes among artists about how to learn to be an artist and among teachers about how students best learn to be skilled writers are not very dissimilar, and they illustrate well parallel conflicts in philosophy and in pedagogy.

These conflicting viewpoints raised interesting questions for instruction. What should be the role of a studio master? Should he work in front of his students, modeling with his own artistic creations, or should he remain in the background as critic and coach? As writing teachers, we have asked ourselves a similar question: Can we encourage originality and freshness in our student writers and still develop essential writing skills?

Another continuing controversy among nineteenth-century studio masters was a spirited disagreement about the level of criticism one should use with developing artists. In many cases, the harshest studio masters literally took brush or charcoal in hand to alter a student's emerging work. Such heavy-handedness is not unlike what any teacher has done whenever she has rewritten a sentence on a student paper and handed it back as if to say, "Here is what you really meant to say; it's better if you word it as I did." Other studio masters looked to praise the good in their students' work, ask writerly questions, and to *suggest* specific technical alterations that the young artist might consider.

Observing Contemporary Studio Classrooms

To further our understanding of studio work, we began to observe studio instructors to help us construct our own version of that pedagogy. As we spent time in studio art classes, observing studio instructors working as artists, coaches, critics, and mentors, it became apparent that what was at the heart of studio instruction was not the orchestration of performances but the cultivation of experimentation; not the assignment of highly specific, corporate creations but the encouragement of students to form individual visions and versions of the work. We were always impressed with the work ethic of students and the coaching/mentoring stance of the instructors. Studio instructors alternately demonstrated new ideas and techniques, worked on their own projects, and quietly visited students at work, offering coachlike suggestions. "Oh, I like the proportion on this hand," or "Try a lighter wash on that tree in the background," we heard them say.

Students worked with such intensity during those studio classes that the instructor had to interrupt their work—literally—to inform them that the class period had ended. We were stunned to observe classes of students, even very young students, who

were so engaged and so actively at work that the time flew by. We wanted our classes to be so engaging for students that they would be still hard at work at the bell and in no hurry to pack up and leave.

The studio classes we observed fostered an approach to instruction that sponsored experimentation, aesthetic choices, decision making, collaboration, self-awareness, and reflection. Taken together, those studio values convinced us that we could never have the kind of classroom we wanted until we could fashion a new definition for the idea of *work*.

Evidence of Studio Work: Observing Products and Processes

At about this time as we still contemplated how to translate these newfound insights in our classroom, two fortuitous experiences with artists and art occurred for us. First, we traveled to the National Gallery in Washington, D.C., to the *Helga* exhibit, a staggering collection of work by Andrew Wyeth arranged in such a way as to reveal the artist's process and actual studio work over a fifteen-year period. The path through the exhibit literally enabled the audience to trace Wyeth's artistic journey from preliminary sketches to finished works. In that exhibit of over 500 pieces, only seven or eight were actually finished: several oils, three or four egg temperas, and several signature dry-brush watercolors. All of the other 500 pieces were essentially prefatory work: sketches, compositional studies on a hand or face, adaptations of perspective and hue, explorations of subject and background. During that productive period, Wyeth said he often papered the floor with failed trials and false starts in hopes that walking over failures would improve future efforts.

The Wyeth exhibit helped us understand the amount and variety of practice and prefatory work in which artists engage in order to find their way to finished products. We realized that we had expected our students to move too quickly to finished pieces, and for the first time we caught a glimpse of how a new version of a writing workshop should be structured.

Second, several months later, the National Gallery staged an exhibit of John Singer Sargent's massive work *El Jaleo*, one curated in similar fashion to the *Helga* exhibit. The exhibit showcased Sargent's prefatory work of research and fieldwork, of sketchbook and tedious studio trial and error that brought forth the stunning finished piece of artwork. Seeing the artists' prefatory work helped us realize that was precisely the kind of commitment to practice that we needed to create within our students if we were to realize a true studio classroom. We began restructuring our teaching, our workshops, and our students' work in earnest.

The Final Piece in Redefining Work

Enter an extraordinary middle school teacher at Amphitheater Middle School in Tucson, Arizona. Ernie Galaz and Dan were collaborating in a program for student teachers when Ernie heard Dan talking one day about studio-based instruction and our effort to redefine *work* in our classes. "Oh, you need to look at Matthew Fox's new

book, *The Reinvention of Work: A New Vision of Livelihood for our Time*,” said Ernie. And Ernie was right. Among other things, Fox helped us think more clearly about the notion of *authentic* work and the importance of *inner desire* in the classroom environment we were trying to create. We came to see that *inner desire*, the love of writing and the passion to do one’s best, grows in our students as they do *authentic* work, real writing for real purposes. We recommend that book to you, along with the works of Schön.

As we began implementing our ideas on redefining work in our classes, we designed our version of a studio portfolio, marking the boundaries for our inquiry and developing a series of explorations that would engage students in meaningful work. We redefined and created evaluation tools (see Chapter 10 and 11 for our ideas on evaluation of CM) to suit our new approaches, and we incorporated students’ reflections on their writing processes, products, and learning as a central role of the class’s writing-teaching-learning processes. The reflective thinking of our students, which we solicited through their portfolios both for the continued development of our own thinking and for their metacognitive benefits to our students, taught us much about what we were doing right and what we still needed to change. But, at last we and our students were working more effectively, having more fun, sharing the balance of work and control in the classroom, and learning from our reflections and discussions. We were well underway.

Applying Studio Methodology to Memoir

CM is a genre uniquely suited to studio methodology because students are writing from life experience, and they know that subject matter better than the teacher. Creating a writing environment in which students work from expert knowledge leads writers to see their work as meaningful work. I know what was special about my fourth Christmas; you don’t—unless I tell you. I know how my sixth birthday is emblematic of many of my social interactions and of my mother’s efforts to be a so-called *good mother*; you don’t—unless I tell you. When the balance in the classroom shifts a bit so that students know that they are working from a stance of expertise, they are motivated to work well and to work honestly on producing quality writing, engaging storytelling, and meaty substance within their writing.

Naturally, teachers are always pleased when students *work*, but the type of work to which we’re referring is not work for the sake of work; it is not mere seat work or busywork. It is the type of work that all real artists, writers, naturalists, medical interns, and even novice teachers undertake—that of working like the professional that you are striving to become. It is work that embodies the theories and values underpinning the studio writing classroom.

Theoretical Grounding of *Work* Within the Studio Classroom

This pedagogical approach to teaching and learning writing is based on the three main theories of phenomenology, epistemology, and constructivism. We have found

that when the preservice and inservice teachers with whom we have conducted various consulting workshops and programs understand fully the theoretical tenets of these philosophies, they are better equipped to understand how this approach is distinctive and different from ordinary approaches to the teaching of writing. With such grounding, teachers also see how frameworks like memoir are uniquely suited to this pedagogical approach to the teaching of writing.

A Brief Overview of Phenomenology

Phenomenology asserts that events that occur within the real world have significance and meaning; the term *phenomenon* is related to this theory that looks for real occurrences in the real world and then posits meaning based on interpretations of those events. It is a theory that seeks grounding in reality rather than one that supports merely formulating ideas and hypotheses that have no authenticity in actual practice.

For teachers, students, and writers of memoir, the idea of phenomenology means that you are teaching, studying, and writing a genre that exists in reality. Just take a look at our bibliographies in Chapter 12, peruse the *New York Times* bestseller list in nonfiction, or stroll through any bookstore to see the explosion of publishing in this genre. Memoirs exist; they are real. Real people read and write memoir. In contrast, we challenge any teacher or student of writing to find an authentic five-paragraph theme in published literary sources outside of those especially created for the English classroom. It doesn't exist; it has no basis in reality. The five-paragraph theme does not occur in the real world that lives and breathes outside of the rather protected and somewhat isolated world of school. Therefore, phenomenologists would assert that the five-paragraph theme is not a legitimate genre, while memoir is.

A Brief Overview of Epistemology

Epistemology has some grounding in religious studies, but most certainly is not limited to that field. Epistemology holds that in order to learn to conduct any endeavor well, the learner must think and work and behave like the professional she wants to become. Under this philosophy, those who want to become artists must work and live as do real artists; they must engage in the activities of real artists. They must have the mind-set and the values of artists. The same would be true for basketball players, skateboarders, teachers, and writers. Simply reading and studying about a field is not enough to learn the field—though such study may certainly help. But in addition to *knowing about* a field of study or an endeavor, one must *live the life*, as Anne Dillard (1989) reminds us, of one engaged in that endeavor. A basketball player can read about historically great games and players, she can read about how to make a hook shot or a slam dunk, but that is not enough. The basketball player must work and practice as do real players. The dedication to living the life of the professional player and to working as hard as do pro players is not an easy task, but the learner—the player wannabe—must undertake such disciplined work if she is to excel.

We have long made the case that the same is true for teachers and for writers. Teachers candidates cannot merely read about and conduct enlightened discussions about teaching—though such *knowing about* activities may provide useful background information to the aspiring teacher. Instead, it is not until the teacher candidate meets real students in real classrooms and begins dealing with the many challenges and demands of teaching that he sets in motion the work, learning, and tasks necessary to become eventually, after much practice, an expert in the field of teaching.

For writers of memoir, the same is true. Students must become *memoirists*—even if it is memoirists-in-training—who are reading, writing, thinking, and living as do published memoirists. Reading memoir is helpful. Talking about your memories is helpful. But no single intellectual activity is enough. The writer must submerge in the full range of activities lived by actual memoirists before he can hope to produce an authentic piece of writing. In this process, the role of the teacher is to create a conducive, safe environment within which a community of writers can think, work, practice, experiment, and learn. Teachers can help construct numerous opportunities—which we call *Explorations*—for students to work and engage in the activities of memoirists. When teachers provide such opportunities and when student writers engage in such work, they are implementing the philosophy of epistemology—and of sound writing pedagogy.

A Brief Overview of Constructivism

Constructivism surmises that all knowledge is essentially personal and created by the learner and enhanced and enriched when those constructions are shared in a social setting. The word *construct* is key here. The learner builds, or constructs, individual knowledge. Then the learner shares her individual constructions of knowledge with other learners within a trusted community in order to refine her ideas, compare them to the ideas of others, build a body of shared experiences within the community, and otherwise benefit from the sounding board and reality check that fellow learners can provide. Constructivists posit that our knowledge is based upon our perceptions, experiences, and interpretations of the world as we know it, personally and individually, and that those perceptions are improved through social interactions.

For teachers, such a philosophy would hold that learning must be active and individual. Lecture may provide useful background information or instructions, but it is not until the learner is personally and *actively engaged* with the information to be learned that she is able to learn and retain it in any meaningful way. The philosophy would also hold that students need class time to interact with their peers in learning-based social engagements such as writing workshops, crit sessions, literary circles, critical friends groups, and other such activities in order to refine and clarify their thinking.

Taken to its logical conclusion, this theory would suggest that *writers must actively build knowledge by thinking and writing in the genre they are trying to learn*. Such a statement seems absurdly simplistic, but think about it for a moment. Too often we have merely *assigned* writing, and done too little *teaching of* writing. We have structured

writing assignments rather than scaffold writing activities. Assigning a memoir as a reading or writing project does little to help students comprehend and undertake the tasks and steps involved in understanding, producing, crafting, and structuring such a product.

Instead, teachers *teach* when they model for students the activities that the students need to learn, and writers learn when they have class time to engage actively in those activities within a community of writers. Teachers *teach* literary genre when they read with and to students exemplars of the writing to be created, and students learn when they have class time to delve into discussions of what is appealing about the writing and what specifically is expertly crafted within the written piece. Teachers *teach* writing when they write with their students and when they work as writers in front of their students, and writers learn when they talk about the challenges and rewards of writing within a community of writers that includes the teacher, sharing experiences and stories together.

In these ways, teachers and students are actively constructing their personal and individual knowledge. They are applying the theories of constructivists.

Approaching the teaching and writing of memoir from a studio methodology incorporates tenets of phenomenology, epistemology, and constructivism. It is real. It focuses on *working like* a memoirist. It provides guidance and modeling for the student writer to build personal knowledge and apply that knowledge to a specific genre and literacy task. It provides a strong interactive and social component for learning. These are the theoretical reasons behind this approach to teaching memoir that give it validity and power.

Next, let's examine the reasons why memoir, specifically, is a powerful genre for these theoretical and pedagogical approaches to literacy and why the studio approach is a compelling methodology for teaching memoir.

Establishing Studio Classroom Values

The work of transforming your classroom into a more studio-like environment for teaching contemporary memoir may seem like a daunting task. You will probably not be able to move your students to a loft or a cavernous studio space with windows and natural light. You won't be able to do much with the physical arrangement of your classroom, but you can do a great deal about altering how your classroom *feels* to students. As we have spent time in studio environments of all kinds, we have come to believe that it's the values you establish in your classroom that create the feel of a studio.

Studio Value #1: Work

We believe that authentic work is the central value of the writing studio. Without work, students don't learn, engage, and progress. Without work, our classrooms are dull places. The main work of the memoir-writing studio is threefold:

- reading memoir,
- writing memoir, and
- thinking like a reader and like a writer about memoir.

We see authentic work as *apprenticeships in a context of making and doing*. Because students must read extensively in the genre that they are to learn, we read and discuss numerous excerpts from published memoirs in our class activities and discussions. Students read entire published memoirs that appeal to them, not in order to complete a book report but in order to converse knowledgeably about what they see happening in the genre and to share examples from their chosen text during class discussions. We bring boxes of memoirs into our classrooms and give minibooktalks about several memoirs each day in order to pique interest in specific books and in the genre. We explore our own memories and the stories that might be interesting for us to write and that might connect with other readers. We study the craft of writing memoir, which we'll discuss at length throughout this book. We read. We write. We discuss. We think. We work. We live the reading and writing life of memoirists. As you continue to read this chapter and this book, you'll see numerous examples of the ways in which our students and we engage in work and in *apprenticeships of making and doing* during the memoir-writing studio.

Studio Value #2: Practice and Experimentation

Perhaps first and foremost, the studio is a place for practicing and experimenting. Writers need to try out their voices and their writing techniques in multiple settings, contexts, and genres in order to flex and develop their writing muscles. Within the framework of memoir, writers engage in teacher-sponsored, but not teacher-owned, explorations of their ideas and writers' techniques. Think again of the studio art classes. Student artists work in front of other student artists. If we are student artists in the studio, we can see each other's work, but I don't stop my work to tell you how yours should take shape. I own my work; you own yours. We both are looking at the same model, perhaps, or trying to sketch the same still life, but no one expects that our finished products will be identical.

The same principles hold true for the writing studio. The idea here is for writers to explore their memories, their voices, and various approaches to their craft in order to see what works for them. They do so by trying out lots of explorations in writing. (We discuss several of these Explorations, or minipieces, in Chapters 3 and 4.) Teachers lead the explorations but do not require the typical standard polished papers in the early stages of the writing. They expect and encourage student writers to turn out unique pieces that represent their individual writing styles and life experiences. And like the prefatory pieces of Wyeth or Sargent, these are experiments, not finished products early on. Smaller pieces of writing may lead to a larger, connected piece of writing, but the connections may not be the typical sequential or numeric transitions of more formulaic writing. We don't encourage students to rush to some organiza-

tional scheme for the larger piece too quickly. We believe the final structure of their memoirs will suggest itself in due time. The connections that emerge to unify the piece can be as unique as the use of white space or as complex as the application of an extended metaphor or as simple as the use of a song lyric or a line of poetry.

These written explorations are also related—but not sequential. Just because a particular piece is written before another short piece does not mean that the two pieces will appear in that order in the finished memoir—or even that they will appear in the finished memoir at all. Such work is consistent with the principle that students—not teachers—own and operate, organize and manage their writing.

All of the written exploratory pieces are filed in students' Writer's Notebooks or in their portfolios for future consideration and for possible future work, or the pieces may be left in the Writer's Notebook as a representation of work conducted on an idea that didn't fit with the finished memoir piece. *No writing is wasted writing* in the practice and experimentation stages, but not all writing will be worth polishing and including in a final memoir piece.

Such experimentations are surrounded by reading memoir excerpts and then engaging in *representational talk*. Student writers benefit from hearing themselves and others talk about what they think, what they have experienced that relates to the memoir excerpt being read, what they know that they might write about, and how they might approach a piece of writing—all done *before* they are ready to write.

In the studio classroom, we take our time and explore. We think and wonder and ponder and talk with fellow readers and writers. We don't rush to finished product—though the time and the deadline for the finished product will most assuredly come, but within a few weeks or months, not within a few days. As teachers and as writers, we plant the seedbed of ideas and then engage in the coaching and mentoring activities that will help students to grow those ideas through planning, experimenting, crafting, practicing, and polishing their writing.

Studio Value #3: Individual Visions and Versions

Just as all artists represent their artistic visions in varying and unique ways in their paintings and artwork, so do all writers. Here, individual and personal voices, writing styles, writing emphases and foci, and presentational styles for the finished products all come into play. Our memoir will not look or sound like yours, and that's how it should be. In the memoir-writing studio, we read numerous excerpts from published memoirs not in order to use those texts as templates and directly copy an author—not so we can write as did that author—but so we can study the craft and technique of individual writers in order to see what we can learn about writing to then apply to our own writing. All authors have distinctive writing voices and writing styles, and that's exactly one of the hallmarks of polished writing that we hope to develop in our students' writings, but such distinction does not come easily.

Recall our discussion earlier in this chapter of the various *compositional studies* that artists use to try out the various positions and poses of something as seemingly

minor as a hand that will appear in a portrait. For the *Helga* exhibit alone, Wyeth drew enough sketches of the same two hands in different poses to fill an entire wall in the gallery. Similarly, writers need to practice, experiment, and try out which of their versions of a memory will work within which version of a finished piece of writing. They will experiment with which vision—or perspective—of their topic that they want to present to their audience. They will test first one finished format and appearance for their memoir, and then another. Like the artists Wyeth and Sargent, student writers need the time and coaching, encouragement and support to find what version will work for them within their finished memoir.

Studio Value #4: Decision Making About Options and Choices

Because the writing studio is teacher-sponsored but not teacher-owned, student writers find that they are faced with many options, choices, and decisions to make. Which experimental pieces will work in the final version of their memoir? Which voice will they use? Which presentational techniques will they include? Where will the memoir begin, and where will it end? Which details will be included and which excluded? The writers' choices are almost endless, but learning to make wise decisions in these areas is part and parcel of what real writers do for each published piece. These are the types of decisions with which student writers need to experiment and grapple if they are to learn actively and to develop their writing techniques and craft.

Giving up so much control over the final product may be challenging for some teachers, but remember that as the constructivists that you now are, you know that students have to engage in that decision making for themselves in order to grow substantially as writers. We may suggest to student writers that we like a particular piece and would like to see more work on that writing, but it is the students who decide whether to continue experimenting and crafting a piece. It is the students who decide if and in what order a piece appears in the final memoir. We certainly coach and mentor those decisions, but the students ultimately make the decisions. Students know what they are trying to convey in their writing; we want to help them to reach their individual goals.

Such an approach to writing clearly flies in the face of regulated and prescribed formulas for writing such as accordion paragraphs, five-paragraph themes, or anything else with lockstep roles and instructions to follow precisely and exactly. We have long maintained that writing is a creative act of the mind, an artistic endeavor to be nurtured by informed intuition and knowledge of technique, but not one to be boxed and packaged, not one to be chopped and diced into meaningless color-coding, counting, or typesetting.

Such a stance may take some practice on your part. Students are quick to sniff out any reluctance or phoniness in your attempts to convey this message about who's in charge of the writing. When you say, "I *really* like this piece," to a student, is your subtext, "And it better show up in the final memoir product if you want an A on the paper!" If it is, work on letting go of that control and of that subtext. Work on help-

ing the student writer to improve the pieces that *she* likes and values, not just the ones that you like.

Artists know various painting and sculpting techniques, and they use that knowledge to enhance their works of art. But, there is no one prescribed right way to draw or sculpt a hand, as you can see in the works of Andrew Wyeth and other artists. Such is also true of writing. Informed decision making about options, choices, and possibilities enhance and enrich students' writings, just as they do the works of professional artists.

Studio Value #5: Working and Writing Within a Community of Learners

Within the writing studio, the word *community* connotes something much more than just *cooperation* or merely a nice group of people, though those factors are certainly to be desired. The word *community* implies a group of writers and learners who do the following:

- share common values,
- conduct themselves according to agreed-upon standards of behavior,
- support each others' efforts and work,
- praise and support experimentations and risk taking even when those experiments and risks don't entirely work, and
- project genuine interest in each others' work and pieces of writing.

Teachers foster the development of such a community of writers, thinkers, readers, and learners when they seek divergent strains of thought, various answers and options to questions and problems, and multiple avenues to success. Teachers also encourage community when they work as readers, writers, and thinkers in front of and along with their students, sharing their struggles and decision-making processes, their interpretations of texts, and their insights as one of the many voices that are valued in the discussion. Certainly, teachers are more informed about writing craft and technique than are most students, but students' insights are often rich with meaning and with fresh creativity that will be lost if the teacher's voice and knowledge are the only ones valued and heard. If such is the case, you will have merely a group of students doing your assigned work, not a true *community*.

Studio Value #6: Reflection and Self-Awareness

Contrary to the opinions of some, the studio-based writing classroom is not a willy-nilly, feel-good-without-standards kind of place. Standards for conduct, for response to writing, for work, and for productivity are very much in place, are clearly detailed at the outset of each new studio class, and are incorporated throughout the time that the group spends together, whether that is a semester or a year. These standards

become part of the fabric of the community, part of the accepted *modus operandi* of the class, and students learn how to point out to each other a consistent lack of effort or of progress. Such self-awareness and group accountability does not come naturally or easily to student writers and learners. It has to be nurtured and encouraged, fostered and developed by the teacher as mentor and coach.

One of the ways in which students can monitor their own progress, growth, and development as thinkers, readers, and writers is to keep a reflective log as part of their Writer's Notebooks with weekly entries on their work and progress that week. How much did they write that week? What was the quality of their writers' experimentations? How much did they read, and what was the quality of their responses to those readings? How well were they prepared for their writers' workshops, and what was the quality of their responses to their group members' writings? We refer to these reflective logs as *Audits*, and we discuss them further in Chapter 10.

Further, at the end of the memoir-writing process, we ask students to reflect upon their processes throughout the framework, on the types of writings and techniques that they tried, and on the extent of their success with those practices. We ask them to talk about what they have learned about this genre of writing that they can apply to other genres of writing, and we ask them to reflect upon what they can do better within the next framework for writing in order to continue to grow as readers, writers, and responders to texts, including both published texts and those produced by students. We explore this concept further in Chapter 10, giving specific examples of the types of reflections that we encourage from our student writers. But we are firm believers that without self-monitoring, self-awareness, and self-reflection, the cycle of learning that can occur within a framework for writing does not achieve its full potential.

Final Thoughts on the Studio Classroom

We think that the studio approach is appropriate for teaching all types of writing, kindergarten through college, and it is the primary methodology that we use in our own teaching. We encourage you to begin now to adapt studio methodology to your teaching not only of memoir but of all that you teach. You'll have some ups and downs, but we believe that the effort is worth the outcomes in learning and in self-efficacy for our students.

Now that you have a basic understanding of the values and work ethic, theories and theorists behind the studio approach to writing, let's examine in Chapters 3 and 4 how those studio values apply specifically to memoir.

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