

## Review of *The Writing Studio Sampler: Stories about Change*

Sutton, Mark, & Sally Chandler (Eds.). (2018). *The writing studio sampler: Stories about change*. The WAC Clearinghouse; University Press of Colorado. <https://doi.org/10.37514/PER-B.2018.0179> [ISBN 978-1-64215-017-9. 217 pages.]

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How has the studio model changed since Rhonda Grego and Nancy Thompson (2007) first developed the methodology at University of South Carolina in the 1990s? How can instructors adapt the studio approach to suit different institutional contexts and learning environments? And what economic and administrative challenges might those interested in implementing a studio program face today? Indeed, while studio models now take different forms, writing programs across the country have embraced versions of Grego and Thompson's studio methodology, including Harvard College, which is where I taught a studio course for underprepared first-year writers for two years. Curious about the ways that my own experiences and pedagogy compare to studio methodologies across the country, I found myself drawn to Mark Sutton and Sally Chandler's edited collection, *The Writing Studio Sampler*.

*The Writing Studio Sampler* presents a series of narratives of writing studio experiences across different university contexts, from large state universities to small liberal arts colleges to community colleges. The collection's contributors also offer a sense of how versions of studio writing can be implemented in face-to-face, hybrid, and online learning environments. Taken together, the essays establish possibilities for new writing studio methodologies that can be tailored to various institutional contexts, but they also serve as a practical roadmap, articulating potential obstacles that those interested in adopting studio methodology might encounter when attempting to launch such a program.

The opening chapter of the collection offers a sense of how Grego and Thompson first developed a studio curriculum, offering a point of comparison for the chapters that follow, which focus on ways that instructors and administrators from different colleges and universities have adapted the standard model. Traditional studio models involve small group mentorship, active learning, and collaborative revision. This approach invites students to bring writing assignments from across their coursework to the studio session—not necessarily limited to writing from their first-year composition classes. In Grego and Thompson's studio curriculum, students earned grades based on engagement and attendance, not on performance. Traditionally, instructors and students have cited the value of this approach as offering students a third space where they can develop writing skills through continuous collaborative inquiry outside of conventional academic structures. But there are all sorts of variations on this model, variations that the authors of the essays in *The Writing Studio Sampler* describe at length as the collection unfolds.

Grego and Thompson's studio model emerged out of a need to provide more institutional support for underprepared writers. Both the writing studio model and WAC programs share an investment in developing curriculums that promote the transfer of writing knowledge across disciplines. In chapter 2 of

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the collection, Alison Cardinal and Kelvin Keown note that the mentors and facilitators of studio courses aim to help underprepared students “repurpose their prior writing knowledge” (p. 36), understand the kinds of writing assigned in prior courses and that they need to do in the future, and develop awareness of how to communicate in a home discipline. In the first chapter of the collection, Chandler and Sutton point out that while research indicates that factors outside of the classroom shape college writing abilities, Grego and Thompson did not have supports in place to enable students to develop their writing abilities outside the first-year writing classroom. The studio model addressed this need, “help[ing] students see beyond their individual course to the larger patterns of how communication was taught and used at the University of South Carolina at the time” (p. 6). One of the most distinctive features of studio writing as Grego and Thompson conceived the methodology, then, is the fact that it exists alongside typical academic structures: studio experiences have a classroom facilitator, not an instructor; they exist adjacent to a course, not as a class in and of itself; and students are rewarded for commitment and effort, not for the quality of their writing.

The studio writing model that Grego and Thompson popularized differs significantly in some ways from the studio course that I teach; so I realized, from the first chapter alone, that there are so many different ways to implement a studio curriculum successfully. At Harvard, my studio course was integrated with, not adjacent to, the College’s first-year writing curriculum, and faculty teach all sections of studio; there are no facilitators or mentors. The Harvard studio sequence exists within the Writing Program, so taking two semester of studio fulfills the first-year writing requirement. Those differences aside, studio at Harvard emphasizes learning by doing—just as traditional studio models do. Studio is a smaller writing course at Harvard, one that involves continued drafting and revision, in-class writing exercises that enable students to apply what they have learned immediately after learning it, and frequent team-based workshops. Because of the small class sizes (a cap of ten students) and longstanding nature of the sequence, these studio courses tend to cultivate community in ways that guide students toward the understanding that writing is a process—one that involves trying out and refining ideas in conversation with others. Such reflections and realizations are at the core of the various studio approaches described in *The Writing Studio Sampler*, marking studio methodology as distinct from, say, that of a writing center or writing group.

The next two essays within the collection offer a sense of how studio faculty and administrators can shape programs and curricula in order to respond both to student needs and institutional priorities. In the second chapter, “Story Changing Work for Studio Activists,” Alison Cardinal and Kelvin Keown explain that because studio models tend to challenge institutional frameworks that prioritize “measurable outcomes and efficiency” (p. 27), Studio faculty and administrators need to think critically about how to articulate the appeal of Studio, as a focus on “financial efficiency, and even learning efficiency, [may at first seem] at odds with Studio programs that rely on small course caps and emphasize the difficult-to-measure aspects of learning” (p. 31). With this tension in mind, the authors put forth what they call “story-changing strategies” to help change the culture and narrative around writing in ways that better align institutional interests with traditional studio values. For example, inquiry into the nature of writing and the demands it places on students in a studio course can help administrators understand that a studio model may be beneficial for student progress outside of the composition classroom and as an attachment to any course where students encounter “new writing situations” (p. 30). At Harvard, for example, life sciences instructors and Writing Program instructors collaborated for several semesters to offer an optional writing studio for students enrolled in the life sciences course, which involved workshops on lab reports and scientific research papers, forms of writing that the student population (mostly freshmen) had not necessarily encountered before. Such narratives of converging interests among writing instructors, instructors of courses in other disciplines, and institutional administrators include the fact that studio offers a pathway for the novice writer (not the basic writer), that studio promotes the transfer of learning across disciplinary contexts, and that studio can help to “shorten the developmental pipeline common at many institutions” (p. 31). The authors of chapter 3, “Studio Bricolage,” share Cardinal and Keown’s interest in adapting studio models to

respond to local, institutional, and student needs. For Matzke and Garrett, the success of the studio program depends on identifying gaps in the writing curriculum, clarifying the goals of the studio curriculum in relation to those gaps, and building relationships accordingly.

One of the problems that studio administrators often grapple with is the placement process, which is the focus of the next two chapters of the collection. Because section sizes in studio courses are traditionally very small, sometimes no more than 10 or 20 students per course, it is often impossible to accommodate all students who would benefit from studio, and placement decisions can be difficult. In the fourth chapter of the collection, “The Politics of Basic Writing Reform,” Tonya Ritola and her co-authors discuss the implementation of the Segue Program at Georgia Gwinnet College, which aimed to prepare underdeveloped writers at the college for credit-bearing courses. The program administrators decided to use the E-Write exam, in combination with a standardized test (the ACT Compass) as the basis for placement, as the administrators were skeptical of using standardized test scores as the basis of placement recommendations. The next chapter, Dan Fraizer’s “Navigating Outside the Mainstream,” offers additional insight into placement procedures that affect studio programs. Fraizer and Ritola, et al. share skepticism about standardized test scores, with Fraizer suggesting that these scores can help “initiate placement, not define it” (p. 79) and that the bulk of the weight of the recommendation be based on writing samples. Fraizer and his colleagues enrolled students in studio courses based on a referral process involving the recommendation of first-year advisors familiar with the writing samples; however, Fraizer insists that enrollment was consistent and the program was successful specifically because students and families understood the purpose of studio early on—that they were “separate, third-space courses with their own credit-bearing weight and evaluation criteria based clearly on articulated goals, not drop-in opportunities similar to writing center visits” (p. 83). At Harvard, the Writing Program uses a similar placement procedure: students submit a writing sample before selecting courses, Writing Program faculty read each essay and recommend placement in the studio sequence or in a one-semester writing course, and students meet with a Writing Program faculty member to discuss the placement recommendation before enrolling in a first-year writing course. Students ultimately have the choice to decide against the placement recommendation, although most students end up choosing the recommended placement.

Chapters 7 and 8 shift to positioning studio as a form of professional development. In Chapter 7, Jane Leach and Michael Kuhne explain their experiment with a blog, which functioned as a means of sharing approaches, discussing challenges, and circulating resources among the instructors of a studio pilot program. In chapter 8, Kylie Korsnack argues that studio can be a unique space for the professional development of graduate student instructors, who often teach first-year composition at many universities. In order to better prepare graduate students for these roles, Korsnack proposes a different model, one where GTAs (graduate teaching assistants) serve as facilitators or mentors in a studio environment, which would allow GTAs to experiment with, fine-tune, and develop a writing pedagogy before a first appointment as an instructor of record in a writing course.

Other chapters in the collection offer visions of new approaches to the studio model. For example, in Chapter 6, “A Hybrid Mega-Course with Optional Studio,” faculty at Arizona State University’s Tempe campus share results of a pilot program for a mega studio course, hybrid courses that enrolled approximately 50 students per section with required asynchronous assignments and optional studio meetings. Both the larger class sizes and optional attendance aspect of this studio model deviate from traditional models, which tend to prioritize small sections and grade on the basis of participation and attendance. Ultimately, while students in this pilot understood the value of studio and reported that they would have liked to attend more, attendance was uneven throughout the semester and students perceived studio as less important than lectures and other required parts of the class. In Chapter 9, Karen Gabrielle Johnson suggests the value of a service-learning hybrid form of studio based on a centralized theme. In this model, students volunteered with an organization related to a future career interest, and that service became the basis of a range of writing assignments, from low-stakes reflection papers to a research project. And in

Chapters 10 and 11, Michelle Miley and Mary Gray discuss moving studio to an online format entirely. Drawing on experience conducting a virtual studio, Miley explains that “because the conversation was asynchronous, writers could come back into the boards at any time” (p. 172), which resulted in more student communication throughout the writing process. Gray likewise indicated that students tended to appreciate having additional time to collect their thoughts, draft posts, and respond to classmates’ writing.

Reading *The Writing Studio Sampler* cover to cover feels almost like standing at the water cooler, swapping stories of studio implementation and curricula with instructors and administrators. The collection offers both a formal, theoretical overview of studio methodology and unreserved anecdotal reflections on how specific Studio programs came to be and the challenges that faculty and administrators encountered along the way. While the collection would have benefited from more sustained attention to the pedagogical innovations associated with the studio model as opposed to the institutional challenges that faculty and administrators confront when implementing these courses, the collection’s detailed narratives make it an invaluable practical resource for faculty and administrators who might be thinking about piloting a studio course in some form. The collection will also be useful for those who already teach studio and are curious about ways of facilitating student involvement or institutional collaboration. Because the authors of the essays in the collection represent colleges and universities of different types of sizes, *The Writing Studio Sampler* offers possibilities for new forms of studio implementation across diverse modalities.

## References

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