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Kathleen F. O'Donovan  
*University of Minnesota*

Steve R. Simmons  
*University of Minnesota*

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## Making Meaning of a Life in Teaching: A Memoir-Writing Project for Seasoned Faculty

Kathleen F. O'Donovan, Steve R. Simmons  
University of Minnesota

*The University of Minnesota's faculty development project, "Making Meaning of a Life in Teaching," promotes collegiality and enhances self-reflection for those who are experienced classroom instructors. Started in October 2003, this project provides a forum that invites participants to examine specific memories from their teaching lives and to transform those recollections into a written memoir. This chapter explores the use of memoir as an effective tool for faculty development, describes the project's structure and components, and presents both co-facilitator and participant perspectives on the process and the memoir product.*

Humans are storytellers and stories are intricately woven into the fabric of most civilizations and societies. Similarly, stories form the foundation of any teacher's professional life. From their first days in teaching, university faculty begin accumulating an amazing array of experiences, some of which may be informally translated into stories shared with colleagues, students, or family members. But college and university instructors seldom have opportunities to tell their teaching stories in more structured and reflective ways. "Making Meaning of a Life in Teaching" is our attempt to provide space and time for storytelling and reflection.

Since 2003, we have created communities of "seasoned" teachers for the purpose of encouraging participants to write a memoir about their lives in teaching. Since several participants in this project were not of suitable age and professional rank to be described adequately by terms such as *distinguished*

*instructors* (Rice & Finkelstein, 1993), *senior faculty* (Jackson & Simpson, 1993), or *elders* (Finkelstein & Jemmott, 1993), we selected the term *seasoned* as an apt descriptor of the participants. Some were, in fact, senior in rank and were seeking to write memoirs as a way of telling their stories and creating a legacy. But participants, regardless of which “season” of their academic careers they happened to be living, were motivated to reflect more deeply on their lives as teachers and to glean understanding from their recollections through the process of writing their memoirs.

Why write a memoir? Personal writing, and especially memoir writing, has experienced a renaissance over the past 25 years (Barrington, 2002). We chose writer and colleague Patricia Hampl’s (1999) definition of memoir, as outlined in her book *I Could Tell You Stories*, to guide us as we designed the project: “[Memoir] represents the intersection of narrative and reflection, of storytelling and essay writing” (p. 33).

From Hampl’s (1999) definition and other insights provided in her book, we developed the following attributes to guide our participants in writing their memoirs of teaching.

- The style of writing for a memoir is different from other kinds of academic and scholarly writing.
- An effective memoir considers a relatively brief segment of one’s life in teaching, not one’s entire career.
- A memoir becomes richer through inclusion of details that appeal to all the senses.
- The “voice” of the memoirist should be authentic and express feelings, insights, aspirations, triumphs, and disappointments.
- A memoir is about both telling one’s story and making meaning from it.

Professional development scholar Schön (1983) notes that reflecting on past experiences is important whenever professionals consider new situations and problems. Brookfield (1995) writes, “the influences that most shape teachers’ lives and that move teachers’ actions are rarely found in research studies, policy reform proposals, or institutional mission statements” (p. 39). He asserts that the most important influences for teachers are likely to be the “memories and experiences . . . the images, models, and conceptions of teaching derived from [their] own experiences” (p. 40). Karpiak (2000) proposes that autobiographical writing, of which memoir is one type, can be an effective approach for faculty in initiating “a process of self-exploration and

meaning making that, in turn, can promote the development of an enlarged view of themselves” (p. 31).

We maintain that to continue to grow as teachers, academics should live “examined” teaching lives. In this regard, teachers can position themselves for personal and professional growth whenever they honestly consider what they know and believe about teaching and why. As part of examining their own stories, teachers may explore the rationale behind their professional practices. Memoir writing is a form of autobiographical writing that has great potential for prompting such self-reflection. One former participant shared her perspective on memoir writing in the project’s second-year evaluation.

Memoir was a powerful tool. True memoir takes one back into the shells or roles of the past and allows for honest memory to make a soul-level impact. Through such introspective writing, we learn what we once learned, but had forgotten. We see what we once saw, but with new eyes.

In her book, Hampl (1999) makes a distinction between describing one’s life events in a memoir and making meaning from those events. She refers to the initial telling of one’s story as the “first draft,” which she describes as “not necessarily the truth, not even *a* truth sometimes, but the first attempt to create a shape [of the story]” (p. 28). She then describes the necessity for the memoirist to proceed to a “second draft” by which she does not mean a mere editing of the first draft text. Rather, Hampl advocates that memoirists must reexamine their “first-draft” memoirs with the intent of “waiting for the real subject to reveal itself” (p. 32).

In his recent book *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life*, Palmer (2004) also addresses the importance of becoming attentive to hidden meanings within one’s life. He refers to such revealed meanings as “third things” (p. 92). He describes this idea as analogous to the Rorschach inkblot test whereby the observer makes meaning from what at first appear to be meaningless blots on a page. Although Palmer does not specifically address memoir writing in his book, it is likely that he would concur that Hampl’s “second draft” describes not only his “third things,” but also what T. S. Eliot says of poetry, “[Poetry] may make us . . . a little more aware of the deeper, unnamed feelings which form the substratum of our being, to which we rarely penetrate; for our lives are mostly a constant evasion of ourselves” (qtd. in Palmer, 2004, p. 94).

In our project, we hoped that the process of participants writing their memoirs would help them to be more attentive to perceptions, ideas, assumptions, and feelings, some of which they might have been previously unaware. While facilitating “Making Meaning of a Life in Teaching,” we realized

that exploration of one's teaching story at a deeper level—one's "second draft" or "third things," if you will—resulted in the emergence of hidden principles about one's life in teaching. We also found that such intentional examination was even more significant when approached within a community of peers.

## Method

### Process

The "Making Meaning of a Life in Teaching" project was initially offered during the 2003–2004 academic year as part of the University of Minnesota's Center for Teaching and Learning Services' efforts to design faculty development opportunities that span the entire professional career. As facilitators, our intent was to utilize memoir writing to prompt reflection about and learning from the participants' teaching lives. Since we also undertook the writing of our own memoirs of teaching during the project, we had dual roles of participant-coach.

In the early phase of planning, we defined the following desired outcomes about the "Making Meaning of a Life in Teaching" project.

- Focus as much on the participants' aspirations as on their accomplishments.
- Involve participants relating to each other on a group basis and in pairs as writing partners.
- Engage the participants' minds and hearts.
- Feature mutual listening and responding to teaching stories of the participants in an affirming and encouraging way.
- Deepen relationships (with others and with oneself).
- Concentrate on making meaning from experience.
- Put participants' teaching stories into forms that could be accessed by broader audiences.

In addition to identifying these desired outcomes, we also developed several other broad objectives that were consistent with our university's goals for faculty development and teaching improvement.

- Encourage seasoned faculty to gain new perspectives about their teaching.

- Model a collegial community within the academy and help build trust among participants.
- Offer participants the opportunity for in-depth examination and reflection upon their teaching.
- Enhance the vitality of seasoned faculty.

Whereas conventional faculty development programs often focus on instructing or coaching participants regarding current teaching and state-of-the-art techniques and technologies—in other words, working from the outside in, the memoir project was meant to work from the inside out. Taking seriously Palmer's (1998) caveat "to correct our overemphasis on teaching technique and our obsession with objective knowledge" (p. 61), we strove to implement an approach to self-reflection that he describes as "thinking the world together" (1998, p. 62). That is, we wanted participants to engage both their heads and hearts in their writing. Thus, when designing the project's workshops and other experiences, we sought to encourage participants to journey inward in order to more deeply explore their lives as teachers. At the same time, we understood that creating one's memoir also required specific skills and techniques. We offered coaching on these as the participants defined, organized, and wrote their memoirs.

### Participants

Originally, we conceived that this project would primarily serve faculty who were in the final stages of their academic careers. However, as the project developed, we realized that the profile of participants who expressed interest was much broader. Those who undertook the writing of a teaching memoir in the project's first year averaged 52 years of age with 19 years of experience in higher education. We expected to work with a small cohort of participants (between 7 and 10) each year. However, 17 participants registered for the project in its initial year. The number of participants in the second year was lower (6), but a substantial number of faculty at our institution continue to express interest in participating in this kind of professional development initiative in the future.

Our recruitment of participants for the project in both years was simple and straightforward. Most participants learned of the "Making Meaning of a Life in Teaching" project through word of mouth from us or from other participants. The Center for Teaching and Learning Services also formally announced the initiative through a mailing to all associate and full professors in

the university. In both years, we made an effort to contact participants within a day of their registration and thanked them for electing to participate.

#### Format and Structure

Bearing in mind that one of the project's objectives was to model collegiality within the academy, we set out to create a space and a structure through which participants would experience the paradox of "being alone together" (Palmer, 1998, p. 98). In this regard, we integrated discussion topics, learning materials, and experiential exercises that encouraged group members to be both self-reflective (Brookfield, 1995) and attentive listeners to others within the writing community. We endeavored to use our time together to address the needs of individuals and to nurture connections within the group as a whole. In our roles as participant-coach, we learned firsthand the need for mutual support during the memoir-writing process. During the academic year, participants found their interactions with and feedback from writing partners to be a valuable element in the process of developing their memoirs (Simmons, 2004).

At an initial retreat held early in each academic year, we shared our desired outcomes for the project with the participants, and we invited them to add to theirs (see Table 19.1). At this retreat, we also asked participants to look broadly at their lives in teaching before deciding on a specific aspect on which to focus in their memoir-writing efforts. We then encouraged them to identify key experiences in their teaching lives that had influenced them or their classroom practice. Finally, we allocated time for participants to write a one-page "beginning" for their memoirs.

TABLE 19.1  
Design Description of Initial Retreat

Title	Format	Date and Duration	Purposes	Outcomes
Reflecting on our lives as teachers	Retreat	Early October; five hours	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Foster trust</li> <li>• Identify key periods or memories in the participants' teaching lives</li> <li>• Present the memoir writing process</li> <li>• Begin writing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop the beginnings of a prospective memoir</li> <li>• Instill the concepts of "first draft" and "second draft"</li> </ul>

In each year the participants embraced the opportunity to examine their lives as teachers to varying degrees. We found that some of our desired outcomes were not viewed as being consistent with the predominant academic culture and values at our institution. For example, during the first retreat of the initial year, one participant challenged memoir writing as “not scholarship.” We concurred that the memoir-writing process differed from some protocols of scholarship as they are defined by some academic disciplines, but we maintained that development of a memoir of teaching was equivalent to or surpassed such scholarship in other ways, and certainly for its potential impact on the memoirist.

On the other hand, many participants in the initial cohort expressed disappointment and frustration with their roles in the conventional academic “culture.” In this regard, Palmer (1998) observed that

... if we want to grow as teachers—we must do something alien to academic culture: we must talk to each other about our inner lives—risky stuff in a profession that fears the personal and seeks safety in the technical, the distant, the abstract” (p. 12).

Most participants in both years quickly warmed to the opportunity that the project provided for them to engage in “risky stuff”—to write about and discuss their inner lives as teachers within a group of trusted colleagues.

During each academic year of the project, the participants met together twice after the initial retreat. As shown in Table 19.2, we identified specific purposes and outcomes for each of these sessions.

While attending the “Listening to Each Other’s Stories” session, participants were divided into small groups and asked to share excerpts from the “first draft” of their memoirs (most of these were now several pages in length). The members of each small group were asked to provide collegial responses and to help the writers consider deeper meanings of their memoirs. During this session, each writing partner also highlighted specific words, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs to which they “resonated.” These responders also wrote notes in the margins of the memoir excerpts that helped explain the basis for their resonance. As a result of such feedback, participants were able to gain meaningful peer input and make better progress on their memoirs.

Also during this workshop, we facilitated a conversation around the question “Who is the intended audience for your memoir?” Hampl (1999) discusses aspects of audience within the context of memoir writing and its significance. We highlighted aspects of her perspective and encouraged the participants to consider how their own unique audience would affect the ways that they framed and wrote their memoirs. Following one of these sessions, a



TABLE 19.2  
Design Description of Subsequent Sessions

Title	Format	Date and Duration	Purposes	Outcomes
Listening to each other's stories	Workshop	Early January; five hours	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Respond to selective memoir writings of participants</li> <li>• Discuss concept of "audience" and its implications in writing a memoir</li> <li>• Explore concept of "voice" in memoir</li> <li>• Foster collegiality</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participants receive response to writing</li> <li>• Concept of writing "partners" reinforced</li> <li>• Advance the memoir draft and writing process</li> </ul>
Sharing completed memoirs and identifying realized assumptions, aspirations, and goals	Retreat	Mid-May; four hours	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Read excerpts from complete (or near complete) memoirs</li> <li>• Share realized assumptions, aspirations, and goals</li> <li>• Exchange gifts</li> <li>• Attain closure for the community and the "shared journey"</li> <li>• Foster collegiality</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Complete (or near complete) memoirs presented to the community</li> <li>• Response to the memoirs provided by the community</li> <li>• Affirmation of the value of the project</li> </ul>

participant shared the following: "Memoir can become a gift to a family or even to an institution, and it awakens parallel memories in readers."

Between the second and third sessions involving the entire group of participants, we encouraged the participants to interact with their writing partner via email or in person. As facilitators, we also met in a one-on-one session with each participant and discovered that the writing partners often provided additional relevant feedback and suggestions that took the memoirists deeper into their stories. In our one-on-one meetings with each participant, we often assumed the role of a coach and offered specific responses to the participants' writing, encouraging them to look for deeper meanings, and asking questions regarding writing style, voice, and audience.

The participants found these one-on-one coaching sessions to be both enjoyable and beneficial. For example, during one such meeting, a participant from the School of Nursing shared her intention to return to the specific place about which she was writing her memoir (a hospital in rural Ap-

palachia) in order to gain deeper insight into her story. In another such session, a participant expressed a new insight about his life in teaching—the realization that he had been both consistent and courageous in his efforts to innovate in his teaching practice. Yet another participant realized during the coaching session that in writing his memoir he had been sidestepping his role as a university administrator and its impact on his teaching life. During that conversation, new meanings emerged for him that later influenced both the content and style of his memoir.

During the third and final session involving the entire group, participants were invited to read excerpts from their memoirs, which were completed (or nearly completed) by that time. After each participant read, others in the group wrote responses that were given to the memoirist, such as “I love the back and forth between the past and present—the changing relationship between student and teacher,” “Wonderful twist—students bringing gifts from core identities and teacher embracing and supporting them,” and “The idea that humility creates the conditions for soul-connection between teacher and student—speaking from the heart.”

Some participants did not complete their teaching memoirs within the single academic year period for each cohort. At the final retreat, we reminded these participants that creating a memoir was an aspiration, but not an absolute expectation. Rather, we trusted that their participation in the writing process had provided new and significant perspectives about their professional teaching careers whether or not a memoir had been completed. We also expected that some would complete their memoirs at a future time and that this project will have served as a “seed.” A selection of memoirs that were completed by participants during the project’s first two years is available at [www1.umn.edu/ohr/teachlearn/meaning/index.html](http://www1.umn.edu/ohr/teachlearn/meaning/index.html).

## Participant Responses

Few opportunities exist within higher education where seasoned faculty can come together to reflect on their lives as teachers. Participants in “Making Meaning of a Life in Teaching” seemed to relish their time together and appeared eager to take steps to deepen their understandings of themselves as teachers. At one of the final sessions, one participant observed that memoir writing requires courage and places a memoirist face-to-face with unconscious and conscious fears. During each session as a whole group, project participants listened attentively to each other’s stories and authentically engaged with one another.

The Center for Teaching and Learning Services sponsors an event each academic year to recognize faculty, staff, and graduate students who have enhanced the university's culture of teaching and learning. Some participants from the "Making Meaning of a Life in Teaching" project have shared reflections about the project during this event. Examples of their remarks follow.

I agreed to participate in "Making Meaning" as a gift to myself, to force me (or give myself permission) to focus on my own reactions to and feelings about what I do in the classroom. My attention is usually appropriately directed towards students and what they are experiencing, but spending time looking inward and connecting more directly with other teachers and their inward experiences turns out to be a great way to recharge my own batteries and to understand better my own position in the classroom—which of course, helps me interact more effectively and more genuinely with my students.

—Participant from the Law School

I valued the opportunity to examine, in depth, my life as a teacher. It has been a gift to rediscover why I chose this path and what influences shaped me to be the teacher I am today. I especially appreciated the facilitators . . . as they encouraged me to explore the events and emotions that give meaning to my academic life.

—Participant from the School of Nursing

One of the values of the group has been in the actual writing of the memoir. Reflecting on my own struggles, uncertainties, angers, and joys as I worked to "grow up" (in academia) reminds me what it feels like to be a young adult who is seeking to find a voice and a place in the world.

—Participant from General College

## Conclusion

In his book about one's calling as a teacher, Palmer (2000) advocates that an academic "must listen for the truths and values at the heart of my own identity . . . the standards by which I cannot help but live if I am living my own life" (p. 51). We have found that the "Making Meaning of a Life in Teaching" project participants' memoirs are quite personal and move well beyond descriptive accounts of events and situations. The memoirists have sincerely sought deeper understanding of their values, attitudes, and perspectives—and in the process they have been revitalized. For example, upon completing

her memoir one participant noted, “Memoir can open us to someone we once were and wish we could be again.”

A memoir is, of necessity, selective. Chittister (2002) suggests that while all things in life are important, they might not be of equal importance. Most teachers would agree with this idea, but we would add that it is by winnowing one’s life in teaching—of deciding what is important and why—and then writing a memoir about it that one gains deeper insight about one’s identity as a teacher and how one might more fully develop in the future.

We have defined a memoir as writing that is to be shared with others. This is one aspect that perhaps distinguishes memoir writing from writing a journal. We have also found that collegial discourse, based on trust, is helpful—perhaps essential—to the process of writing a memoir about teaching. We are convinced that future offerings of this kind should include aspects of both community-supported and individual writing. When reviewing our project’s desired outcomes and goals, it has become evident to us that the process of reflecting on, writing about, and sharing with colleagues one’s life in teaching engages the mind and heart to help make meaning as a teacher.

Finally, as we have stated, fostering trust within the community has been a central element of this project. Writing a memoir is difficult and involves myriad considerations such as what to include, whom to include, whom not to include, why it matters, and what it means. Gaining counsel about such considerations from trusted colleagues is most helpful, yet implicit in this observation is an assumption that colleagues truly care about the memoirist and seek his or her best interests above all. During the final session in one of the project years, a participant responded to this environment of trust by stating, “I feel I know people better in this group than some colleagues I’ve worked with in my department for more than 20 years.”

As co-facilitators, we have reminded our participants—and ourselves—that building and maintaining trust is an ongoing process. For participants, one challenge was the importance of being authentic and candid in their introspections, as well as projecting a willingness to foster trust within the group of participants. And because trust begins “at home,” we are pleased to note that the trust that has formed and been sustained between us as co-facilitators of this project has been most gratifying of all.

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