The Act of Making: Experiential Learning, Discovery, Transformation

MARGA RAHMANN ’78, P’12

What does it take to walk through the doors of a studio filled with unfamiliar people using noisy, if not dangerous, equipment one has never seen before? Why would a student take that step when there are endless demands—fun or not—on his or her time? What is so compelling about the Student Workshops?

It could be the Student Workshops’ siren song. It starts from listening to the descriptions of the Workshops and watching a demonstration at First Year Student orientation, or hearing a friend’s enthusiasm for a finished project, or seeing a display of finished pieces through a Hop window; and it gets stronger until those students finally walk over the thresholds of the Student Workshops to begin their journeys in the world of design and fabrication. A bowl. A ring. A picture frame. Thousands of these objects were created as “first projects” in the Student Workshops, each meaningful in a unique way for the student creator. For a few, these objects were the first and last projects attempted, but for many more, they were the gateway to a new world where hours spent exploring new projects is a highlight of four years at Dartmouth. And for still others, they were the start of a career. Regardless of their journeys, what is true for most of these former students is that each experience in the Workshops shaped a never-forgotten, dearly held memory.

For students who step into the shops, they are taking the ultimate risk of finding out what might happen if they try—to make a bowl, a ring, a picture frame—and what might happen if they try harder—to make a more complicated bowl, a more complicated ring, a more complicated picture frame. What was commonplace suddenly isn’t. Suddenly the world is different—magical, not through magic but from knowledge, borne from process, practice and perseverance. They experience the promise of losing oneself in a moment of personal transformation, being seduced by the act of turning one thing into another. Students see objects differently, materials differently, time differently because, in the act of making, the world has changed: Now they see interconnections they didn’t think of before. Now they look at how something works with a new appreciation for design, physics and chemistry.

In their own testimonials, Dartmouth students repeatedly say how much impact their shop experiences have on their lives in and out of the classroom. It matters that they emerge from their Student Workshop journey so much richer than they thought possible. This is how the Student Workshops make such a difference at Dartmouth.

Rahmann is the Hop’s Associate Director/General Manager and supervisor for the Student Workshop programs, a position she has held for over 20 years.
Joyful Engagement

GREG ELDER director

The making of objects with one’s hands has long been recognized as having cognitive richness as well as being a joyful way to engage in the world. “Perhaps…humans harbor a deep need to experience ourselves as inventive makers of our world,” wrote art historian Lydia Matthews in the 2007 journal The Meaning of Craft.

This activity engages all of a person’s experiences, skills and intelligence, providing a situation where one performs to the fullest extent of one’s ingenuity and imagination. When making, it doesn’t seem possible to only partially employ our abilities and creativity; therefore, we give it our best, and each time we get a little better and work a little smarter. We may encounter many limits, such as time and money, but these are just other parts of the puzzle to solve. As I watch students solve these puzzles and learn how to use tools, I see the enormous satisfaction and pleasure they derive from gaining self-reliance and in reaching their goal of expressing what was, until very recently, just an idea.

Experiential Learning

BEN FERGUSON ’15

A few weeks ago, I returned from a six month, 2,200-mile Appalachian Trail hike. I made friends from Georgia to Maine and shared stories, learned to improvise, survive, strip my life to essentials and live on $500 a month. I gained a new appreciation for the world and learned how to live, something we often forget in lecture halls and dorms, sitting at computers and eating in dining halls.

Since returning to campus, I have done a lot of thinking about experiential learning. I have been a studio assistant in the Davidson Studio for three years after previously teaching elsewhere, and I feel that I have learned more through my teaching than I have in any ceramics class. Learning to make pots is good, but when you’re asked to sit with someone and describe exactly what you’re doing and how you’re doing it in a way that they will be able to learn from, you begin to re-evaluate your methods. Often in forming the words to describe my actions and in watching students reflect what I am doing, I realize I’ve developed an unhealthy habit or shortcut, or that there is a better way. I learn as much from my students as they do from me: how to be creative, listen, teach and watch, and how best to interact—things that you can’t always learn in a traditional classroom setting.

Ceramics Studio Notes

JENNY SWANSON director

The class of 2018 is making a strong presence in the studio, many finding the studio in the first week of the term!

Jocelyn Povelison ’14 (below) taught a handbuilding workshop, “Vessels Inspired by African Forms”, inspired by her travels in Lesotho, Africa.

Hannah McGehee ’15 (right) is investigating how people communicate their lived experiences of fibromyalgia through narrative and creative expression. Part of her Dartmouth Senior Fellowship this year will be to create clay figures.

We’ve had tremendously busy activity this past year. Lots of woodturning on the lathes; architecture students building chairs; and a few different groups taking a canoe paddle-making class, as well as carving spoons and vessels from green wood. Engineering students made an incredible outdoor seat that was placed at a local child care center. The Dartmouth Board of Trustees had a dinner in the woodshop, which was beautifully decorated with student projects from the woodworking, ceramics and jewelry studios. It was a great year that saw students joyfully engaged in creating their own work.

Less Stress, More Creativity

DANIEL OSPOVITCH
Dartmouth Ph.D. Candidate in the Program of Experimental and Molecular Medicine

A swing of the hammer and the dull surface of the copper grows shiny, its malleable nature begins to harden, and I feel the stress of grad school—failed experiments, unending to-do lists, unsolvable scientific questions—melt away. The Donald Claffin Jewelry Studio has provided me an outlet for stress relief, but has also shown me an entirely new and creative side of myself. In fact, the studio has acted as a “gateway drug,” leading me to take classes at the League of New Hampshire Craftsmen and, eventually, begin selling my jewelry. What I’ve learned from the studio goes beyond the making of a physical form, allowing me to foster a better sense of creativity that permeates all aspects of my life. While MRSA and silvering may not seem connected, the problem-solving and creative processes intimately link art and science. My time in the studio has been an integral part of my Dartmouth experience as a graduate student, and has profoundly impacted the way I view and interact with the world.

Medicine and Metalsmithing

SUZANNAH LUFT DMS ’14, Yale Medical School Resident, Internal Medicine

The jewelry studio changed my life. As a medical student, the jewelry studio became my refuge—a place where I could experiment and create with a freedom that I had nowhere else in my life. Over the years of spending afternoons with the same group of inspiring jewelers, I developed some of my closest friends. The jewelry studio also helped me lead to an exciting aspect of medicine. With the assistance of Jeff and friends in the studio, I also was able to create a sculpture as part of a fourth-year medical student project to improve awareness about advance directives. We constructed a copper mobile to which people who filled out advance directives can add their own pieces. The mobile was installed at Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center shortly before graduation, and for me it was the grand finale of the two passions I discovered at Dartmouth, medicine and metalsmithing, finally intersecting.
Lexi Krupp ’15
Hop Student Workshops Intern

On college tours I would ask if the school had pottery wheels for student use. Upon learning that Dartmouth had an open studio where students (even first-years!) could make pots, I scrolled through the images of students’ ceramics on the studio website. I have worked at the Davidson studio as a student assistant for the last three years. My favorite part has been interacting with the diverse student audience, teaching them, seeing their work and learning from them.

Now, as the Student Workshop Intern for the Hop, I enjoy seeing the ceramics studio in conjunction with the woodshop and jewelry studios, and in the larger context of the Hopkins Center. It’s been wonderful to focus on engaging the student body with these opportunities outside of the bustle of academic life, and to interact with a community so invested in integrating the arts into students’ everyday life.

Mug by Lexi Krupp ’15

Remembering Walker Weed ’40
1918–2014

Walker was the Student Workshops Director from 1964 until 1981. He was one of the founders and a trustee of the American Crafts Council and was later selected a Fellow in 1992. In 2008, he received the Award of Distinction of the Furniture Society and in 2010 The Lifetime Achievement Award of the League of New Hampshire Craftsmen. Since Walker’s retirement, he regularly visited to see what projects students were making as he was always interested in what inspired them. Walker was such a vigorous worker. In his last few years he made a door with a stained-glass window for his house, a new dining table, and six chairs for friends. A typical Walker project began one time when he showed up at the shop and asked for help getting an ash log out of his car. He had cut the tree down himself at home with his chainsaw and used his tractor to get it into the car. Then, in order to have the material he needed for his chairs, he cut it into boards on the bandsaw. Walker’s inspiration, very good humor and wonderful friendship is missed at the Student Workshops.

STAY IN TOUCH WITH THE STUDENT WORKSHOPS!
Email hopkins.center@dartmouth.edu and we’ll keep you posted on the latest happenings in the shops.

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Gifts from our Friends

Thanks to the generosity of our Friends group this past year we have been able to continue to employ a number of professional craftspeople and artists. Some are local, teaching on a regular basis, and some are visiting, offering special lectures and classes.

Our Friends also have made possible a number of shop improvements and new tool purchases, keeping our shops in excellent working order. The woodshop has added a panel saw for cutting plywood. This saw greatly improves safety in cutting large sheets of materials. At the lathes we have also improved the dust collection system in addition to purchasing a number of much-needed tools such as gouges and wood-holding systems.

In the Jewelry Studio, the gifts of our Friends have allowed us to purchase a precision pulse arc welder, called the PUK 4. All the welding happens under a microscope with an electrode the size of a needle. The intricacy and complexity of the welds is astounding. We also were able to purchase a digital engraving machine that can engrave photo quality images onto metal. This new tool has allowed us to remove some of our metal etching acids from the studio, which improves safety.