

The Writing Workshop for Dummies: how the new teacher can mentor first-time writing students

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Abstract:

For a first-time writing teacher, stepping into the creative writing classroom can be an overwhelming experience. The student might feel just as overwhelmed, so it's up to the teacher and student to work together and make the experience as positive as possible. Through research and experience, the creative writing workshop is explored and evaluated. Can students be taught how to write or must existing talent be nurtured? What is the best way to nurture a novice writer's work? Myths of the creative writing classroom are debunked while methods of ensuring a positive and productive workshop are discussed. The research concludes that through an inviting workshop environment and unique writing exercises, each student can discover their individual talents and find their own unique voice, while the new teacher gets comfortable with the teaching process.

Writing can be a very scary thing. It requires time, patience, determination, and skill. Being a first-time student of writing can be a scarier thing. It will take even more time, patience, determination, and skill. Teaching writing might involve an even larger learning process than being a student of writing. As a first-time teacher, stepping into a creative writing classroom can be an incredibly overwhelming experience. The student might feel just as overwhelmed, so it's up to the teacher and the student to work together and make the experience as positive as possible. Through unique writing exercises and a comfortable learning environment, students will discover their individual talents and find their own unique voice, while the new teacher gets comfortable with the teaching process.

Storytelling is an important aspect of the writing process. It has been an integral part of humanity from the dawn of civilization to the current computer age. Stories entertain us, teach us, and make us feel. They are a large part of communication, and a standard way of life. Though we've greatly progressed from the time of those first, fireside sagas about mammoths and saber-toothed tigers, our communal and individual needs for stories remain constant.

We use writing to express all kinds of messages: to share stories, note financial transactions, record history, imagine the future, express love, hatred, humor or melancholy. Writing gives us access to that knowledge. We can trace how an idea has changed over thousands of years, or argue against the opinions of those long dead; all because the discoveries of others have been recorded and collected in writing.

Although writing has traditionally been associated with the teaching of English, today we know that students who write in all disciplines not only become better writers, but have the opportunity to process their thinking and become active learners in anything they decide to do. Creative writing, itself, is seen as its own discipline. It lets us record our own personal lives, thoughts, and feelings. We write to learn, to share what we've learned, and to express our creativity. It can be a liberating experience, and an incredibly satisfying one.

There is a saying that goes, "anyone can write." I'm not sure where I've heard it, but I've heard it plenty of times, and I believe this to be true. But writing is not enough, it is important to write well. While, in my opinion, writing cannot be taught, I feel it can be nurtured and developed through time. Not everyone starts off as a brilliant writer, but if someone has the passion and the skill to be a writer, then they can be trained to nurture their writing and mold it into something worthwhile. If someone doesn't possess that passion, then trying to teach them how to write well will be a waste of time. As started on the 'About the Workshop' page of the Iowa Writers' Workshop section of the University of Iowa website, "writing cannot be taught, but writers can be encouraged." In order to learn how to write well, a person needs to possess the passion for it. (University of Iowa)

As teacher-writers and students of creative writing, we need to know our audience. Most of the time, when writers have trouble with the voice or tone of their writing, it's because they're trying to write something that does not come naturally to them. Most writing students, when they sit down to write something, are very concerned about getting it right the first time or impressing the professor. They spend a great deal of time looking up words in the dictionary, fiddling with their grammar and searching for synonyms (word processors seem to make this worse as we all fight to get rid of the red and green underlining). Often, this makes their writing feel forced and unnatural. They are not writing for themselves, but instead, writing like they think or feel they should be writing. Discovering their audience is extremely beneficial to the student writer, and "writing what they know," especially in the beginning stages, can be extremely beneficial. It is up to the teacher to help them discover that.

The writing workshop is a great starting point to hone and nurture writing. Through the workshop environment, writers can discover their talent or sharpen their craft. It can be a place for novice writers who need guidance, or experienced writers looking to test their work on an audience.

Each will hopefully receive some constructive criticism and develop their writing skills in the process. Katherine Haake, in her book, "What Our Speech Disrupts: Feminism and Creative Writing Studies" states, "...the final goal of any creative writing curriculum ought to be to provide students with the experience, materials, and framework within which they can define the guiding questions that will sustain writing through the rest of their lives." (19)

While the workshop can be useful for some students, it can certainly be a waste of time for others. The workshop is not suitable for students hoping for an easy 'A' or trying to pass time with a 'breezy' elective. Workshops can be, and usually are, work-intensive - both in regards to writing and reading - and worthwhile only for the serious writer.

There is a myth going around some University campuses that Creative Writing is easy, and getting an 'A' in the Creative Writing class can be a breeze. For this reason, many undergraduate creative writing classes are scattered with students who just don't care about the art of writing. But anyone who thinks creative writing, in general, is easy, and the writing workshop is the gateway to an 'A,' should be warned. This campus gossip is nothing but a University myth. I'm sure many of us know or have known students who don't want to be in school, but feel forced by their parents to get a degree. They might think to themselves: *What sounds easy? Creative Writing. Okay, let's go for it!* Not many students realize just how much needs to go into writing in order to make it good, or even readable.

As humans, we all have feelings and can get those feelings down on paper, but that doesn't necessarily mean what has been written is good. Writing takes time and practice to nurture. Lots of theory and application goes into the writing workshop. We've all taken workshops that haven't applied theory, but what have we really learned from them? Not much. Writing might seem easy at first glance, but in order to write well, theory needs to be learned, even just a little of it, and applied to the writing. According to Patrick Bizzaro in his essay, "Reading the Creative Writing Course: The Teacher's Many Selves," "...on the whole, students enter creative writing courses without relevant reading and writing skills." (239)

For this reason, the traditional writing workshop should be a place for serious academics only. Those looking for an easy 'A' need not apply. Kenneth Burke, a famous literary critic and rhetorician, created a "metaphor for entering academia." This metaphor is often called, "The Burkean Parlor." (Heller) Burke writers -

Imagine that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you, to either the embarrassment or gratification of your opponent, depending upon the quality of your ally's assistance. However, the discussion is interminable. The hour grows late, you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress.

This same metaphor can easily be applied to the creative writing workshop. For the novice writing student, stepping into a writing workshop can be like stepping into the Burkean Parlor for the first time. The student is new to the parlor (the youngest in the class), and “others have long preceded you” (the others are older, wiser, and can write much better). The people in the parlor are in a “heated discussion” (which the new student is too inexperienced to understand) and no one will “retrace” all the steps for them by helping them understand the topic being discussed. Slowly, like in the Burkean Parlor, the student will become more familiar with the process through listening because, as Dr. Haake points out, “what any real writer needs is time.” (4) This is how I felt during my first undergrad workshop, and through time, I got more comfortable with the writing process and more productive with my criticism.

I first entered the Burkean parlor in 2004, as a double major in both English - Creative Writing and Cinema and Television Arts - Screenwriting at California State University, Northridge. I had graduated high school in June of 1999 and spent nearly five years at Los Angeles Valley College, trying to “find” myself and discover what I was good at, as many writers should. I took extra classes and participated in many writing workshops, to make sure that is what I wanted to do. Eventually, I knew I was ready and transferred to CSUN as a 23-year old junior, when I should have graduated one year before, according to my parents, and society.

Katherine Haake, the feminist theorist I quoted earlier, was a myth in the Creative Writing circle at CSUN, before she ever became a reality for me. Stories about her circulated to all the creative writing majors. Some warned never to step foot in Dr. Haake's class because she was crazy, and her class was intense, concentrating too much on theory. Others embraced her eccentricity and commended her for her wild theories of writing. I had met Haake briefly because she was my creative writing advisor, and she seemed harmless enough. Yes, she was always over an hour late for our appointments and came in scatter-brained and confused, but

beneath her shabby clothes, white hair, and thick glasses was a brilliant advisor and I wanted to see what all the classroom fuss was about. So I signed up for English 465 - Theory of Fiction, during my last semester. Katherine Haake was the instructor.

The whispers started even before Dr. Haake stepped into the classroom that first day. Most of the so-called Writing majors did not want to be there, but they had no choice. This was their last semester and Haake's class was the only one being offered for that specific section, which was a requirement, no substitutions allowed. As I suspected, Dr. Haake was about 15 minutes late, thankfully, since I was also running behind. She walked in with a yoga mat, scatter-brained as always, and a bit out of breath. Were students actually scared of this tiny, harmless woman? As the class progressed, I began to understand why.

Haake was a theorist and I can almost guarantee that over half the students in that class had never had a theorist for a creative writing teacher. We were used to writing stories, poetry, essays, and papers, without applying any theory to them. Dr. Haake required theory in our writing. In her mind, there was no other way to write. Since the first day, I was no doubt confused by the theory Haake taught and was determined to hate her, and the class. But a big part of me, the insecure part, also needed to impress her, so I was determined to "get it." Haake spit out theory after theory, throwing out names I had heard in passing, but barely had the chance to study. Everyone in the class was confused, and no one knew what Haake was talking about. By the end of the course, Dr. Haake, despite her eccentric methods, taught me how to write during my final semester at CSUN.

When the concept of "burrowing" became the lecture topic one afternoon, everything suddenly made sense to me, including Haake and her teaching methods. Before Dr. Haake introduced the term to her class, I was incredibly lost when it came to writing. I knew I loved to write, and felt comfortable doing it, but my writing had no form or rhythm. I'd be inspired - by a moment, a song, a sentence - and I'd write, not putting much thought into the actual words. My stories were personal, inspired by the things I knew, and they were more about telling than showing. It was good for the moment, but had no substance for anyone else except me.

Haake refers to burrowing as "a particular way of working the language," which is "informed by, not derived from, Derrida's concept of *supplementarity*." (248) According to this concept, "language signifies according to an operation of substitution and replacement, which occurs as

a supplement that results in a surplus, something added, the thing changed, new meaning.” (176) This concept didn’t make much sense to me until Haake introduced “burrowing.” I became a better writer the moment I understood what “burrowing” was. Suddenly, as if by magic, it all made sense. I don’t think it’s a coincidence that the first story I wrote using “burrowing” as an example was the first story of mine to get published.

“Burrowing” refers to ‘burrowing into language.’ Haake specifies it as “a particular way of working the language.” The term basically asks the writer to “dig” into their writing. Most stories begin with a first sentence – that’s all, just a sound of words in the writer’s head. In “burrowing,” the writer is asked to imagine a sentence and listen to it closely. Then, he must imagine that sentence as the first sign of a story, and add - *supplement* - a second sentence. The story has just become two sentences, the second of which has transformed the first, but the two now form a single unit, to which another sentence will be added, and so on, until the story is complete. Since I am often inspired by sentences and phrases, burrowing would allow me to let that first sentence lead into the next, which would lead into the next, etc, until a story had been formed. As Haake states, “one becomes two, two becomes three, three becomes four, and with each addition, the entire story shifts and grows.” (248)

In burrowing, it is “critical to listen to the sentence embedded in the prior sentence, the just-written sentence, to hear, as well, the sentence to-be written. This is as much a function of sound and rhythm as it is of meaning.” Basically, if the writer listens closely to what he has written, he can hear the trace of the sentence that is to be written. The ear should lean toward where it has just been instead of where it thinks it may be going. The sentences connect seamlessly, the language of the story taking on a kind of poetry, instead of being generic and flat.

Most students, undergrad especially, and even some graduate, will not understand the principles of theory. They will abhor it, be against it, and shudder at the thought of it. While burrowing is essentially theory based, perhaps it can be seen as “theory for dummies.” And while, technically, I am no dummy, I’m also not one to pick things up as quickly as a more scholarly student - after all, I write what I know, rather than attempt to take risks and challenges with my stories, which has served me well up to this point. That is what works for me, as it no doubt works for most writers.

Burrowing was the easy way for me to learn how to write well; it's a wonderful way for the new teacher to introduce the new student on becoming a more successful writer. The phrase is more in the language of the writer than the theorist, and more relatable for the average student. Burrowing can help the student form a rhythm with their writing, letting language become more musical, while telling the same story. It's something that worked for me, and a key concept I plan on using to reach out to my students. It is one theory that they will definitely understand, and not be afraid of.

An effective workshop is a must for the serious writing student. Dr. Haake's class was the first serious workshop I had taken as an undergraduate, and I learned more in those 15 weeks than in my previous eight years in college. I had always gotten 'A's in all my workshops so I lied to myself and thought I could write well. But Haake made me realize there's more to writing than just spitting out words and assembling them together. The students and the teacher can make or break the workshop experience, as most of us have no doubt experienced, and which I experienced with Haake.

John Bush, in his interview with Peter Elbow for a 2001 interview in *Critique Magazine*, says "safety in writing is my highest priority." A comfortable workshop environment is extremely important in creating "safety" for the student writer and the first-time teacher. Safety can be a way for both teacher and student to be equally comfortable with the class, and eventually with each other. It is vital for the teacher to allow the student freedom to express themselves and figure out who they are as writers and, through time, in developing their own personal voices. As Elbow points out, "due to the lack of safety in some classrooms, student writers don't take risks; they don't feel safe when they write." Balancing this safety with class activities is extremely beneficial in helping the student get comfortable with their writing and the demands of the class.

Teaching can be an extremely stressful yet completely satisfying job. But it is more than just a job, it is a chance to change lives for the better. Like the student, a first-time teacher can also feel as though they are stepping into the Burkean Parlor for the first time. They are the most inexperienced teacher at the school and their colleagues have long preceded them. They have much to learn before getting to that same level as the rest of their colleagues, so being comfortable in the classroom environment and making sure students write to the best of their ability is a must. Haake says, "you can't ever know, you can never really tell, whose life has been transformed by your teaching and whose has not." (29) This is incredibly true and it should

be every teacher's priority to try and change their student's lives for the better, by helping them understand why and how they can be better writers.

While I am mostly going to refer to teaching creative writing at the undergraduate level, the same ideas can be applied to any grade level, including the more serious graduate student. As a teacher at the undergraduate level, I would create "safety" by emphasizing the process of creative expression rather than concentrating on the finished product. It is impossible for a student work to be truly finished in a workshop environment. That would take much more time, and many more drafts after the class is over.

Perhaps to break the ice and get students' in their comfort zone, each class would begin with a ten-minute free-write, where they can write anything that comes to mind. This can give the instructor a moment to absorb the classroom environment and mentally prepare for the lesson of the day. A couple of students would volunteer per class and read their free-writes out loud. In order to help them get over any stage fright, a student will need to read at least one work out loud during the semester. After the free-write, one student per class can share a favorite story or song, and talk about why they like it. If time allows, the stories and songs can be read out loud. This will ensure that the class gets to know each other better and get comfortable with each other.

Using Peter Elbow's four stages of audience relationship as inspiration, I would encourage students to write what they know, exploring different thoughts and ideas without any restrictions. I like this idea of the four levels - 1) Private Writing; 2) Writing that people see but don't respond to; 3) Writing that gets a response; and 4) Writing that gets criticism and ultimately a grade (Elbow). It is important for students to get comfortable and honest with their writing, and if they know a work will not be graded or seen, they will be more honest with themselves through their writing. When it comes time to share their writing, hopefully the student will have discovered their strengths and weaknesses and can apply it to the 'public' work that will get the criticism, without worrying about their grade because the writing now means much more than that.

Fear in the creative writing workshop is a big issue for both the student and teacher. It has no doubt kept many students silent in their creative writing classes and many teachers from completely applying their knowledge. It certainly kept me silent in many classrooms during my high school and undergrad years. Fear of being wrong, fear of being criticized, fear of being

rejected, and fear of offending. Each time I've wanted to speak, numerous thoughts would race into my head, and the fear would keep my mouth shut - *I know the answer, but could I be wrong? Will I look stupid? Will the instructor judge me for my words? Will the class laugh me off? Am I really at a right to speak?* This fear followed me right out into the 'real' world, kept me shy and reserved, and often made me angry. This is a fear I am just starting to get over as I become more confident in my writing, and my abilities as both a writer and a potential teacher.

There were, however, some classrooms where this fear became nonexistent, the rare classroom where I felt comfortable and free to express my thoughts and feelings without a worry that I might be wrong. These were generally my upper division workshops, the classes only writing majors could take. This allowed for frank, serious discussions and comments. I never felt judged in those classes, and was encouraged to speak and state my mind without restrictions. The classes became a comfort zone, where learning became fun and easy because of the instructor and the students. I learned without realizing it, the knowledge constantly accumulating, until one day, it was just there, much like my experience in Haake's class. Those courses shaped me into the person I am today, and the knowledge I acquired will always be with me.

It is up to the instructor to eliminate that fear in the classroom. The instructor should never intimidate the student, and give them a worry-free environment where they can ask questions and allow feedback to help them hone their craft. A good way to do this is to refer to psychology and what is known as the "Gestalt Method." The "Gestalt Method" has a lot to do with how counselors and therapists focus on what is being done, thought and felt at the moment, rather than on what was, might be, could be, or should be. The method emphasizes personal responsibility which focuses on the individual's experience in the present moment, the therapist-client relationship, the environmental and social contexts of a person's life and the self-regulating adjustments people make as a result of their overall situation. (Woldt 2005: 220-236)

In short, the psychotherapist looks for signs in the patient – a raised eyebrow, a nervous movement – that would help them understand what the patient might be thinking, so they can better help the patient. The psychotherapist will hope to help the patient experience his feelings fully, instead of simply gaining insight into his problems or speculating about why he feels the way he does. Taking the "Gestalt Method" into consideration, I would be a mentor, friend, editor, and critic, rather than a teacher. So in the case of any silenced students in my classrooms,

there is probably something they could, would or should share. It is up to the teacher, me, to help bring that out. As Linda Sarbo and Joseph M. Moxley state in their essay, "Creativity Research and Classroom Practice," "we can make the creative writing class a safe place for experimentation and self-expression." (136)

The challenge of the "Gestalt Method" is for the teacher to determine what might be on each student's mind. If the teacher placed front of silenced students were to notice little mannerisms within each of them - *are they uncomfortable? Are they shifting or folding their arms? Is there a curl of the lip when a certain topic is discussed?* - and were to then express what he or she sees in them, perhaps the students would realize something unique about themselves, therefore creating the desire within one or all of them to open up a discussion of some sort. The success of this would of course depend on how creative the teacher is when using this method. This might be a very effective way of nurturing students to be themselves and express their present character and inner thoughts well enough to break the silence (Woldt 2005: 220-236).

For me, creativity works by stimulating the mind, by allowing the student the freedom to express themselves and figure out who they are and what they can write. While a course outline for the workshop is extremely important, I would never restrict creativity with the syllabus, especially at first. As Sarbo and Moxley point out, "we need to question whether an orderly syllabus and the advantages of evaluating similar writing products serve our convenience rather than our students' creative process." (135)

In the first two weeks of class, I'd allow the students to become their own teachers by sharing their favorite authors and stories, perhaps by bringing excerpts from their favorite stories to class and reading them out loud. As Tim Tomlinson writes in *The Portable MFA*, "in a writing class, you want to read writers who will stimulate your desire to write, not writers whose diction and content and viewpoint are so removed from your personal experience that they read like the literary equivalent of museum pieces." (5) I'd encourage students to write whatever comes to their mind, exploring different thoughts and ideas, without putting a word count or page restraint. I would let students know that there is no right or wrong answer, just a matter of opinion, and that any opinion is welcome in the classroom. This might make the student more comfortable and spark a healthy debate about what writing really is, and what methods each individual student uses. In turn, the instructor will get to know each student, while becoming more comfortable as a teacher.

Creativity, while it cannot be taught, can be nurtured and brought out by not restricting it. My writing workshop would emphasize the process of creative expression rather than concentrating on finished products, because, as I mentioned, a work can ever truly be finished in a workshop environment. I would focus a great deal on personal memories and how they can be used in one's creative discoveries. Through a series of exercises that would help to stimulate the imagination, I would encourage students to catch the moment of inspiration and develop it, and recapture the childhood joys of making new and wonderful visions out of the most common things, without necessarily having them write a memoir. This will be used as a method to get them thinking and allow the creative juices to flow.

A weekly journal would be required, but the assignment would be up to the student, and not stressed on the syllabus. The journal will not be graded so the student can be free to write about whatever they choose. "It can be largely fragmented and free-form, geared toward exploration of the unconscious or it can be more systematic, with daily entries involving a particular scene or idea." (Bogen 7-8) An actual syllabus would take shape by Week 3, but instead of telling students what to write, I would ask them to write what they know and what they feel. I would persuade students to carry a notepad or any recording device because inspiration could come from anywhere. I would encourage them to observe and listen, perhaps even a private conversation, because inspiration can come from the most unlikely place and moment. This would definitely stimulate the creative process, without restricting it. The reading list would consist of Tobias Wolff instead of Virginia Wolf, and Denis Johnson instead of Samuel Johnson. This reading might be more relatable and approachable for the student; therefore, they wouldn't be so intimidated into silence.

As a teacher, I would never restrict specific themes, genres, or emotions, because this would limit the student's creativity. I remember in one of my first writing workshops at Los Angeles Valley College, a female student had written a story about a couple having sex on the hood of a car after committing a murder. This was the rare workshop where each piece was read out loud. The instructor was so horrified, he would not let her finish reading the story, and she burst into tears in front of the whole class. This instructor was, and is, a truly brilliant man, but I felt he was very rude and completely out of line. The story was not that graphic, and from what I remember, very well-written. This was obviously embarrassing and traumatizing for the student. She dropped the class and I never saw her on campus after that day. I think, no matter how

"sensitive" the subject might be, each student is entitled to explore their creativity however they want to. As teachers, we really need to be open-minded and encouraging about each individual student's talent and ideas. I, for one, feel that a creative writing instructor, unless one teaching at a religious school for example, should be open-minded and encouraging, because frankly, they can encounter any kind of story in the workshop setting.

Grading, while extremely controversial for creative writing classes, is incredibly important. In my class, the grade will be determined by many factors, the least of which is the student's ability to write. I would rather judge the student on improvement rather than talent (which can slowly be developed through more workshops). Attendance and class participation should be a very important factor in the final grade. Timely handing in of assignments is also crucial.

The portfolio, a culmination of the student's work throughout the semester, will be the ultimate deciding factor. It will be the student's decision which writing they want to include, so any added pressure will hopefully be non-existent. Through my own workshops, I have come to realize just how important the 'process narrative' is. This will be for the teacher to access how much the student has learned in the writing process. With this piece, the student will reflect on their writing and what they learned from the class and how they applied it to their rewrites. Hopefully, this process can bring the student full circle to what they wrote in the beginning of the course and using what they learned throughout, to nurture and mold their writing.

A workshop can be successful only if the criticism received is productive. Like most undergraduate workshops, students say they like or hate a piece but cannot give a decent reason why, or any helpful advice on how to improve the piece. As a graduate student, that has thankfully never been a problem, which tells me that as writers learn to develop their craft, they learn how to provide constructive criticism in the process.

It seems that most undergraduate students who are required to critique a peer's work are afraid of offending the other student, and will give false criticism, which is counterproductive for the writer. When a student begins to feel safe in a class, he will find his voice and begin to speak out more and voice more truthful opinions. There is a big difference between good and bad feedback. Good feedback is frank and honest, pointing out the strong points of the piece, and also what the writer can improve on. Bad feedback has the student saying they like or hate a piece, or that it reminds them of "so and so," without explaining why. A student stating they like

a piece or that they relate to it does not help the writer understand how to fix the problems. It just makes him think his writing is perfect and no work needs to be done with it.

Here is a short screenplay about an ineffective workshop experience, taken from my own experiences as an undergraduate -

FADE IN:

INT. CLASSROOM - DAY

EIGHT STUDENTS, ranging in ethnicity, age, and gender, sit in a circle. The INSTRUCTOR, a man in his early 30s, is at his desk, reading a book, ignoring them.

The students are in mid-discussion about one of their pieces, an intimate short story about love and death. The story is written by BOBBY, an 18-year old freshman in his first creative writing workshop.

The other students are: SUZY, an obviously bored 20-year old; DEREK, a 24-year old video-game aficionado; SARAH, a 32-year old single mom who yearns for a degree; FRANK, a 26-year old forced into school by his parents, and who has changed his major 8 times; YOLANDA, a 23-year old psychology major who wants to write but doesn't know how; MARIE, a 29-year old television major, and DANNY, a serious writing student.

Bobby, per the workshop rules, is not allowed to speak until the others finish commenting.

SUZY

I liked your story, it was cool.

DEREK

Yeah, it reminded me of the time my girlfriend dumped me, the bitch!

SARAH

The writing was extremely passionate. I sensed the character's loss and his need for love. It was incredibly touching and realistic.

FRANK

I didn't like it. It was too sappy and I was bored.

YOLANDA

I don't think the character would do what he did. It's not ethical. It's unrealistic and stupid. Psychologically speaking, he's an idiot.

MARIE

I like it, the story was really sad. It'll make a good TV show.

DANNY

The story was very intimate and personal, which was good. I felt kinda dirty reading it, because it seemed like I was reading some restricted diary pages that I shouldn't be. You really hooked me with the opening, and the ending line was incredibly powerful, but the middle portion dragged for me. I'd seriously think about cutting the middle down a bit; there was a lot of repetition and unnecessary lines. You can say the same things in less space and not lose the core of the story. The ending definitely redeemed itself and the twist was moving and powerful.

(hands Bobby his story)

I made some notes on the actual copy. You might find it helpful.

Now that everyone has commented, it is Bobby's turn to speak.

BOBBY

Thanks for the feedback. Does anyone else have any suggestions on how I can improve my story?

The class remains silent.

BOBBY

Can you tell me why you liked or didn't like it?

No one speaks.

SUZY

Professor, I think we're done here.

The instructor puts down his book.

BOBBY

Did you have any comments on my

story, Professor?

INSTRUCTOR

I don't like to comment on the student's work, Bobby. I have come to realize that the only thing students do is change their stories to reflect my feedback, and make it even worse. It is up to you to figure out the rewrite for yourself.

BOBBY

But how? I'm just learning all this stuff.

PROFESSOR

Read the textbook and the assigned stories, Bobby. Learn from the masters. The 'how' is for you to figure out.

You'll notice that of all the students in the workshop, only one really gave any constructive feedback, and that was Danny. The rest said they liked or disliked the story and couldn't back up their criticism. Sarah started off with giving what could have been some constructive criticism, but stopped herself. Why? It all goes back to 'fear.' This fear kept Sarah silent. The instructor is incredibly incorrect for not guiding the student and giving his thoughts on the story. This makes the student feel like the instructor doesn't care. The feedback a student receives on their work is just as important as anything else they can learn in the class, and often, feedback from the instructor can be the most valuable. There is a way to give feedback without being cruel, and that's exactly what Danny did - pointing out the good then letting the writer know what could be worked on, in a nice and civil manner. Notes on the student's hard copy is especially helpful, because they can see any problems before their eyes. It is up to the student whether or not to use the feedback. They should never be forced to accept all the feedback, and the instructor shouldn't expect them to either. But, the instructor should always provide it.

This feedback is essential for the student to rewrite his script and make it as good as it can be. Rewriting, while a dreaded word for many students, is extremely important, and should be taught throughout the course, and expanded on toward the end. "It is at the final stage, the revision of drafts, that the workshop has its most value." (Bogen 10) We've all heard that "the key to good writing is rewriting." Many student writers tend to consider their first draft the final product. But to most professional writers, and especially the teacher-writer, the first draft is just

the beginning of the writing process. Rewriting, however, involves much more than simply proofreading. Student writers must learn to accept the criticism of others and detach themselves from their own pages, so they can apply both their caring and their craft to their own work.

This detachment is not easy. Not many writers, and especially not student writers, have the discipline to do that. Without any constructive criticism, they can never learn to detach themselves from their pieces, and rewrite them to the best of their abilities. As a small exercise, I might have the student rewrite a free-write exercise or journal entry, by minimizing the words, and trying to say the same thing in less space. I would discuss with them how to filter out the unnecessary, extraneous ideas in the editing process and have them ask questions about their writing, and perhaps view it as an outsider, rather than as the writer. This would train them before rewriting an actual at-home assignment.

Instead of “red pencils,” I will follow Sarbo and Moxley’s advice, and “encourage students to expand their boundaries and explore alternatives.” (136) Hopefully, this rewriting process can bring the student full circle to what they wrote in the beginning of the course, and using what they learned throughout, to nurture and mold their writing. Even if the writing is unfinished (after all, what writing is truly finished?) at least the student could work on making their writing stronger.

The workshop is undoubtedly the easiest and most obvious way to teach creative writing. “At its best, the workshop produces superficially proficient but empty work and at its worst it gives young writers a narrow and distorted idea of what writing actually is.” (Bogen 12) By making the classroom a comfortable environment for the student, the teacher will learn how to get comfortable with themselves and “learn to like teaching Creative Writing.” (Bishop 280) With the application of simple theory and in-class writing and sharing, students can nurture their writing in a “safe” and worry-free environment. We owe it to our students, and the craft of writing itself, to appropriate that experience as best we can.

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