Is the Workshop Working?

A Survey of Writers & Educators

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EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

Inspiration is working every day.
—*Charles Baudelaire*

So much of what has defined modern society has focused on the nature of labor—think of the labor movement, mass production, socialism. As early as the mid-nineteenth century, writers (such as Baudelaire) began to replace the Romantic idea of inspiration with the idea of work (and, by extension, training, apprenticeship, and technique). The writing workshop is an outgrowth of this change.

In Part One of this survey, we asked three educators to comment on the positive and negative results of the writing workshop tradition in America and to consider the ways in which the workshop has come to reflect contemporary notions of education, the relationship between the writer and his audience, and the nature of the imagination.

SURVEY QUESTIONS

1. What, in general, do you believe have been the positive and negative results of the writing workshop as an educational model?

2. What do you believe are the fundamental assumptions of the writing workshop tradition?

3. Can you describe how you have tried to modify the workshop to suit your students' needs, as well as your own convictions as a teacher?

LEE UPTON

BACKGROUND STATEMENT

I am a writer-in-residence and a professor of English at Lafayette College where I teach courses in creative writing and literature. I graduated with an M.F.A. from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, where writing workshops were, and continue to be, a primary focus of an excellent program. My remarks below largely concern workshops in poetry.

1. Positive/Negative Results: We should probably attach a "Writer Beware" sign to the writing workshop. But before I take the workshop to the woodshed accompanied by conventional complaints, I want to think of its particular power as a practice and a discipline.

The writing workshop is true to its name: it is engaged with work, work responded to by one's fellows. For the young writer who cannot imagine alternatives to his/her own poem, the writing workshop's strategies may prove invaluable. The writer gains an enhanced sense of what can happen on the page or the computer screen or in performance. Good writing workshops offer training not only in craft but in heightening the writer's capacity for attention. We get tangled in the writing at one moment and at another we see ourselves outside the poem, attempting to pin the words just as the words slide away from us. In the kinetics of it all, the workshop makes at least momentarily visible what the writer has accomplished—it's like a magnifying lens on the poem-in-process.

And yet, the writing workshop, as conventionally constituted, may act as a scene of correction. The poem is arraigned before a finicky circle of the workshop gods, bent on suspicion of the poem shriveling before them. Such writing workshops are often devoted to "fixing" or dismissing each work of imaginative writing rather than exploring its potentials. As such, the writing workshop, and the culture of the workshop, become akin to napkin folding—a session of folding and tucking the poem's edges to form a shape familiar to workshop members.

Even in a workshop intent on more than simply correcting a poem, the very methodology of the workshop and its potential for claustrophobia encourage orthodoxy. An imposing leader is not necessarily required for this process to take effect. Over time, workshop members unwittingly condition one another's tastes until a limited range of sensibilities holds prominence. Members may not only become overly dependent on replicating one aesthetic but may find themselves in thrall to the workshop as the primary form for legitimating their work. The poem becomes a little like the fish in Bishop's famous poem, all overhung with war medals.

This having been said, the writing workshop may surprise everyone involved. The fierce student suddenly assumes an opalescent and gentle style. The mild student becomes fierce and hands in a staggering polemic. (Of course, some students will want every workshop to have the predictable charm of the quilting bee or the barn-raising, but I suspect even quilting bees and barn-raisings are more psychologically intricate than they're generally given credit to be.) Writing workshops thrive on a certain level of discomfort—not too much or we're all stunned, but enough to let us know that when we labor with language some-

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thing important is at stake. The writing workshop, then, as it is commonly conceived, ensures that our work is put on the line and we must in some measure declare ourselves, and declaring ourselves can mean surprising ourselves.

2. Fundamental Assumptions: The guiding assumptions of the workshop tradition are:

- That the creation of a poem is an essentially solitary act and the reception of it is social. (Experiments with collaboration—long overdue in some workshops—can reveal how the creation of a poem can be a social and/or collective process from the outset.)

- That at least some members of the workshop have something significant to say and are intent on serving the best interests of the poem. (This is not inevitably the case, but a resourceful writer may find that even a wrong-headed response will knock something loose in the poem and prompt reconsideration.)

- That the ability to respond to criticism, even the most well-meaning criticism, comes without great strain for many students. (The battle to listen to others' comments without undue suffering is often a difficult one. My authority on writers' sensitivities is Virginia Woolf, who surely knew something about the matter. In *A Room of One's Own* she writes: "Remember Keats? Remember the words he had cut on his tombstone.... It is the nature of the artist to mind excessively what is said about him. Literature is strewn with the wreckage of men who have minded beyond reason the opinion of others.")

- That students will assume subtraction as a primary task in the workshop—for the least demanding strategy is to cut away parts of the writing. (Addition, enlargement of any sort, is much more difficult to discuss, but some imaginative work withers without our honest attempts to discuss this direction in workshops.)

- That we can make specific recommendations about style and form but not about subject matter or theme, even if we acknowledge form and content as inextricable. (We may believe that pressure on style amounts to pressure on subject matter and theme. We may also fear entangling ourselves in the obsessions of the writer or curtaling the writer's crucial sense of freedom. In other words, we mustn't suppose that it might be a rousing good idea to let a dog die in the imaginative work in question—even if we believe with all our being that such a choice would be startlingly effective and at least worth a trial experiment. My feelings are mixed. Almost inevitably, I ask questions rather than make suggestions regarding matters of general content. And yet I must say that sometimes it's not an entirely bad idea to tell a writer that it's your honest opinion that a dog ought to die and that the second stanza is a good place for the grave.)

• That virtually all poems-in-process can benefit from the workshop. (Surely there are poems that flourish in stages only after a long period of silence; a writer must be greatly protective of fragile work. Students might be advised to keep some imaginative writing in abeyance. Some secrets are good for us.)

• That the writing workshop saves the beginning writer precious time, accelerating development, particularly by making flexible the supposedly notorious rigidity of the autodidact, introducing the writer to issues of craft, and ensuring the writer gains wide reading experience. (Yet can't the workshop in some rare cases waste a writer's time? A writer beginning to work on new fronts may take a wrong turn if seduced by the pleasures of acceptance by a group of other writers commenting regularly on his or her work. Of course such behavior is the writer's fault and not the workshop's, but the workshop may exert its own peculiar temptations that the young writer must be ready to resist.)

3. Modifications: I suspect that many of us who teach creative writing "interrupt" the workshop model in common ways. What follow are some interruptions to, and extensions of, the workshop model that I have found useful:

• Before we engage in the first workshop session, I ask my students to bring in poems they admire. This lets us see the range of tastes in the class before critiques begin.

• Because the first comment in the workshop session has the potential to determine the rest of the discussion, I encourage a different student to speak first each time a new poem is presented. As a rule, I don't make comments until at least three others speak. A short waiting period (a couple of minutes for reflection) is instituted before we discuss each poem so that the less loquacious can gather their thoughts.

• In addition to full-group workshops, I employ smaller group workshops and "rodeo workshops." In the latter, students meet in pairs for a brief period and then switch partners several times in a session. (These are timed sessions—they take longer than it requires to hog-tie a calf, but not much longer.) Of course the rapid change in partners means that responses are not carefully formulated. But there are advantages: responses convey a raw spontaneity and each writer, upon meeting a new partner, will find it illuminating to note if certain perplexities or understandings are echoed. These quick-change workshops mimic the way we actually encounter poems in publications and performances; we respond immediately and viscerally.

• I try to make workshop sessions build on one another; they needn't be isolated. At the end of each workshop meeting, I assign an exercise that develops out of what we have encountered that day—or what we have not encountered. Students might be required to use a strategy that was generally avoided in the session, perhaps an exercise involving matters of lineation, spatial arrangement, sound effects, or image clusters.

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Interrupting the workshop in some of the small ways that I've already mentioned decreases the chance of the workshop becoming airlocked against new development. The workshop—that painstaking attention to what is being read and to our own responses, that improvisational performance by a group—renders great value, despite the temptations it poses. I particularly like the fact that there's something both basic and sophisticated about the writing workshop as I understand it. In the workshop we can feel the spines and the ridges of the poem; the workshop has a handmade quality to it. It relies on our getting our hands dirty by working down to the wily comma. I don't know a better way to teach a writer that there are many possibilities in language than by getting the writer to experience the page through the eyes of a number of sensitive (or insensitive) readers.

The workshop is preparatory work for many writers, whether enrolled in a formal writing workshop or meeting informally in practices guided by the ruling ethos of the traditional workshop. It is a way station for many, although for some it remains a resource returned to often in long and successful careers. Many of us have been very fortunate. When I think of the leaders and members of the workshops I participated in as a student what I feel most strongly is continuing and undiminished gratitude.

MICHAEL MORSE

BACKGROUND STATEMENT

I attended my first writing workshop in high school. This was followed by four years at Oberlin College and two years of graduate workshops at the University of Iowa. Since 1987, I have taught creative writing at the Northfield Mount Hermon School, New York City public schools, the Ethical Culture Fieldston School (where I teach middle and high school English), and Gotham Writers' Workshop, where I started the poetry program in 1993.

1. Positive/Negative Results: I greatly value my early writing experiences in workshop settings for their lessons in process, exchange, editing, and critical thinking—all of which helped suck me out of the black hole of my own head and the tutelage of any single mentor. Workshops have allowed me to gather with others who shared a passion for language and its possibilities. The mix of individual work and collective critique is a good impulse, and I defend its platonic essence.

That said, I've been in some workshops where the sharing of different philosophies and aesthetics hasn't yielded great results. Participant X has work that focuses on heady familial epiphanies experienced while shoveling snow from a driveway; participant Y is more interested in the fractured narratives of postmodern witness. No one said it would be easy.

One weakness that might exist—voiced especially by poets over the years—is that workshop participants quickly learn that their potential audience more than likely consists of those who have similarly participated in workshop culture as opposed to a "general" readership (whatever that means). But, over all, the only real mistake would be to tout the workshop as the only pedagogical model worth using.

2. Fundamental Assumptions: I suppose that workshops are in tune with contemporary theories about classroom teaching: more emphasis on teachers as facilitators and less emphasis on teachers as pharmacologists of knowledge. Though the moniker "Writing Workshop" might not say much about contemporary notions of the creative process, the term has certainly proliferated. I did an online search and in less than one second the engine found about 81,300 results.

One website claimed that its program has apprentices from Iceland to Uruguay. The concept of apprenticeship got me thinking. In his essay, "Personal and Impersonal," the always-sage (and much-missed) William Matthews discusses how the practice of craft "suggests the anonymity of apprenticeship, the subjugation of ego to procedures proven valuable by collective and traditional experience." The workshop, even as it only loosely maintains a degree of anonymity (e.g., let's take the author's name off of the page and stress the work and not the person) is one way of lessening the isolation of apprenticeship. Standard workshop lip-service? It still holds true. Matthews adds:

> An apprentice begins by confronting those parts of a craft that are easiest to describe with words like *anonymous, collective,* and *traditional.* But a skillful apprentice moves toward a condition of mastery by which quite opposite words are invoked: *hallmark, signature, style.*

I like his line of thinking because it suggests progression and movement. In my early workshops, I simply craved experience and exchange. In concert with more traditional literature courses, workshops offered another method of apprenticeship, one that treated my work with a level of import and legitimacy—whether it deserved it or not—and lent peer response a like degree of authority. The older I became, the less I felt I needed a workshop. It's hard to say what tangible skills I received from my apprenticeship. I did not learn how to heat a forge or smelt things. And yet critical reading skills, genre-specific language, and exposure to a variety of aesthetic impulses/ideas/styles/forms come to mind. I'm pretty sure that what I've learned is more about process than fact. What also remains is a network of relationships that were started in those collective experiences—readers whom I trust and with whom I can still share work and discuss literature.

As with anything ubiquitous, the workshop is easily parodied—I love how Matthews calls attention to the "Calvinist diction" in workshops: "Does the poem work? Does it earn its last line? Does it take risks?" And yet workshops remain valuable and viable as places of teaching and learning. Much of my focus thus far stems from my own education in workshops from secondary school on and from my recent experiences in teaching poetry workshops to adults. I'm even more convinced that workshops are a viable and even necessary component in educating children. If *one* of my 14-year-old students finds herself 10 years from now working effectively with a group of co-workers—using language skills, critical skills, and her familiarity with group interactions that balance individual intentions and collective experience—then she has reaped benefits from a workshop experience.

3. Modifications: At lower levels (e.g., middle school) one has to watch one's diction and pace things more slowly. Kids are learning concepts, vocabulary, study and organizational skills, so workshops on that level often have a more teacher-centered approach. I might, for instance, begin a lesson on tone of voice with a reading and discussion of Jorge Luis Borges's "Borges and I," followed by a writing and sharing-aloud session, and only *then* proceed with the workshop. In my high school creative writing classes, we tend to

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read and discuss various models of writing for weeks, supplemented by writing assignments that stress a particular aspect of language (e.g., point of view in fiction or figurative language in poetry). When we do begin to workshop, we focus on writing that has grown out of targeted homework assignments (e.g., a second-person narrative that commences with a fortune from a fortune cookie or a love poem that uses the specialized vocabulary of a hobby or professional practice).

I don't know that I could come up with a total alternative to the workshop model. I *do* know that workshops helped prepare me for the years of personal, private work that any artist/practitioner must dedicate to craft. Much talk in educational circles revolves around different learning styles and how teachers need a variety of methods in order to reach all students. As for creative writing workshops for the more mature set, I'd offer this: if you can *only* work in a workshop, that might say something about you socially and have very little to do with what you're producing aesthetically. If, however, you keep in mind that you'll have to ride out on your own one day, then the workshop is as good a way as any to get your riding skills up to snuff.

GARY LENHART

BACKGROUND STATEMENT

I came to poetry through undergraduate and graduate work in English literature. I had already published poems and left graduate school before I attended my first writing workshops with Ted Berrigan and Alice Notley at the Poetry Project in New York City. Since that time I have taught writing workshops at Mercy College, Columbia University, the Community College of Vermont, and, for the last five years, at Dartmouth College.

1. Positive/Negative Results: Too often the emphasis in a workshop is on writing as work. In an effort to present art as a respectable academic activity, we understate its playful aspects and limit possibilities and scope. But writing workshops *do* allow beginning writers to encounter an audience other than family and friends. In the best circumstances, they find an audience of peers who are supportive and demanding, the kind of audience that might cluster around a little magazine or reading series.

Students are spurred to write frequently, often to deadline. They see their efforts in the glare of sometimes competitive eyes, but, unlike receiving a hostile review from a stranger, they know the source of the criticism they hear and can weigh the remarks accordingly. They are more apt to view writing as a craft, to learn quickly its tricks and axioms, and to regard themselves as artists instead of misunderstood geniuses. They discover that performance is generally rewarded, that intensity and idiosyncrasy may require champions, that diligence, tact, and enthusiasm contribute to success. They realize that with writers as with lawyers, doctors, or money managers, accreditation signifies competence and not talent. In the best instance, they meet others who can't get enough of books or talking about books, and begin

to measure their own achievements against inspired company. In too many workshops, however, participants form a support group overconcerned with group dynamics and increasingly insulated from wider considerations.

2. Fundamental Assumptions: Elizabeth Bishop and James Schuyler expressed doubt that anyone could be taught to write poetry. Yet their careers may serve as models for the writing workshop. Both poets were blessed with sophisticated supportive audiences that included friends such as Robert Lowell, Marianne Moore, John Ashbery, and Frank O'Hara. If you concur that their writing benefited from interaction with such company, then the advantages of a writing workshop should be clear. The workshop tradition assumes that writing is a *social* process; the writer is always writing or listening to someone, however internalized or transcendent. If the model errs, it may be in its bias towards making those voices conscious.

3. Modifications: I make two major decisions about the conduct of each workshop: What poems and stories should students read as inspiration or models? Should assignments grow out of models or should I leave them wide open to participant initiative? I've always distributed extensive suggested reading lists, but as workshop participants seem to arrive having read less and less, I have increased the required reading. At the community college, I usually designed assignments around selected literary models. During recent years at Dartmouth, I've been pleased with the results of turning students loose.

Some participants have complained that as a workshop leader I'm not "confrontational enough." In most cases, they have in mind my remarks to *other* students. I urge discussions to describe or identify the character of a poem or story, understand it on its own terms, offer suggestions for revision or comparisons to another text. I'm pleased if students leave the workshop with a sense of how readers respond to their writing and with echoes of totally great poems in their heads. I have friends who believe workshops should address the motives for writing, but can we really know *why* we love?

Critics of the workshop tradition seem bothered most by the certification or accreditation of workshop graduates, as if the possession of an M.F.A. conferred the right to call oneself a poet or novelist. I've always thought that writing a poem or a novel conferred that right, and no qualitative judgment was implied. Ideally, we would all have delightfully inspiring friends.