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# The Undergraduate Creative Writing Workshop

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## The Undergraduate Creative Writing Workshop

### *Abstract*

More and more institutions are offering undergraduate Creative Writing Programmes. Many of these offer the workshop as part of that programme. The undergraduate creative writing workshop differs from the postgraduate one and is also different from workshops offered outside of the academy. This paper defines that workshop, and discusses some of its advantages and disadvantages. It offers some further thoughts about the undergraduate creative writing workshop in general. It looks at the format used at one institution, showing how previous modules feed into a Level 3 two semester long workshop. It illustrates the practice of one particular lecturer, giving special emphasis to how work is marked and feedback given within sessions to ensure maximum confidence and progress in students. Suggestions are made of useful strategies for workshop facilitators. This paper proposes that participating in a workshop is a skill that needs to be taught and that that skill is enhanced in students as they progress through the three levels, which in turn leads to the nature of the workshop changing as they progress .

### *Introduction*

The high-powered creative writing workshop, often used on Masters courses, where students' work is scrutinized, deconstructed, defined, reconstructed and generally discussed in detail is relatively common. Outside of academia, critique groups and writers' circles of all levels exist, ranging from 'tea-parties', where everyone says something nice about everything, to hard-edged groups, with very strict procedural rules. Yet none of these scenarios is quite what is meant here by the 'undergraduate creative writing workshop'.

The participants of this workshop are either settling into a genre they know they want to work with generally or experimenting with something a little alien to

them while they still can before they become, in some cases, jobbing writers; or in other cases relegate their writing to the status of hobby. They require very focussed feedback on their work. They will usually be working with people they know to some extent and with one professional academic. There is likely to be a wide variety of different types of writing within the group. This particular workshop will come at the end of an undergraduate course, so will include reasonably experienced writers. It will also be good preparation for postgraduate education.

### ***What we do***

Many students join our English and Creative Writing programme because they want to be writers and they live locally. The English element includes a vast quantity of reading. We smile as the first years complain at our working lunches that they seem to be doing more reading than writing. Our Level 3 students assure them that they will be doing much more writing in Levels 2 and 3. We all know that that will mean – they will be doing even more reading.

We run a two semester module in Level 3 entitled “Final Portfolio”. Earlier modules are taught through seminars which contain a workshop element. The first session of the first Semesters Introduction to Creative Writing is largely taken up with establishing ground rules for the workshop element of each session. These ground rules will vary from group to group. Further semi-taught modules consist of lecture-type input from the tutor, seminar-type discussion of texts used, a creative writing exercise done in the classroom, the sharing of the work produced according to the group’s workshop rules, and a more serious attempt at a similar exercise for homework to be workshopped at the next session.

Students in the Level 3 Final Portfolio group, then, are quite used to presenting work, having it scrutinized by peers and lecturer alike, giving similar feedback to peers, and then going away and rewriting – or not if they so choose – according to the feedback they have received. We actually work with students in groups of four in our own offices. This is a luxury for which we have had to negotiate, but by moving from a one hour meeting with twelve students to three one hour meetings with four, we save timetabling the headache of finding us small seminar rooms. Two students each week email work to us and other members of the group two days before the workshop.

We all have a chance then to read and make written comments on the work before the session. We spend about twenty-five minutes on each student's work. Each student brings their work to the workshop five times a semester.

The workshops are not genre-specific, nor is any attempt made to match students with lecturers who work in similar areas.

Students are working towards a 3,000 word creative piece of prose – a short story, an extract from a novel or a piece of life-writing, 30 minutes of film or stage script, or a collection of ten pages of poems. They also produce a 1,000 word Writer's Reflection. They are expected to supply drafts of the creative piece and a bibliography for the Writer's Reflection. The week before submission the students attend one-to-one tutorials with their tutor. Interaction in between sessions is encouraged with or without the tutor.

### ***What I do***

In my annotations, I go into as much detail as possible. I use a green (preferred but not always available) or blue pen. Red has negative connotations. Black is not visible enough. I ask slightly rhetorical questions on overall structure, characterisation, pace, balance between dialogue, description and exposition, dramatic tension, instances of telling instead of showing, line-breaks, use or metaphor – in fact on every technique with which we are all familiar and which isn't working all that well in the text in question. I pick up grammar, spelling and punctuation mistakes, clunky text and typos. The students do the same to each other's work.

Yet these are not the comments that matter most. They may be more useful in fact in the future when the student's own inner critic is better developed. At least at this point our students know how not to take these comments on the text personally. The comments at the end of the text are more important. They go something like this:

1. The main strengths of the piece are identified. I always start off with something positive. One can find something positive to say even about the direst of texts. At this stage, though, the texts tend to be more than reasonable.

2. The main weakness is highlighted. I usually only dwell on the biggest weakness. This is the one whose absence would make the biggest improvement to the text.
3. Up to three suggestions are given of techniques which will help the writer to improve their writing. I look for those which will make the biggest impact.
4. Finally I give a general note of encouragement.

This way of writing comments comes to me instinctively after years of teaching languages at secondary and tertiary level, where I used a similar pattern of assessment. Absolutely no grades are given for two reasons:

1. This is formative assessment, not summative.
2. If one gives a grade and even if one gives grades and comments the student tends to look only at the grade.

I am gratified to note that research indicates that this is good practice. Handley (2007) reports that negative grades can prevent students from internalising the comments and acting upon them in the future. Also, students tend to see the comment as justification for the grades. This is further discussed in *When less is more: Students' experiences of assessment feedback* (Handley et al 2007).

Starting with the positives leaves students' self-esteem intact and gives them the courage to listen professionally to constructive criticism. Vanderslice (2000: 155) also argues that

students are often just as confused about what they are doing well as by what is not working. Further, by *beginning* with what is effective in a piece, students are better prepared to hear what they need to work on.

The comments at the end of the assignment are not the place for correcting every single fault. They are made to aid the student to make the most effective progress with the least amount of hurt. The annotated text, on the other hand, can be frighteningly packed with comments which may seem to add up to negativity. Yet it

would give a false impression to leave those out. Texts that are accepted for publication can come back as intensely marked, so this is a true reflection of what happens in the industry. It would also be wrong to allow the student to think that any unannotated part of the text was perfect. A fully deconstructed text will be more useful to the future writers, who may well look back at earlier work to test whether or not they are repeating earlier mistakes.

### *Advantages for students*

The workshop provides writers with an opportunity for meeting their readers. Stephanie Vanderslice argues (2006: 147) that in workshopping there are the

the purposes as well as the best practices of this twentieth century phenomena, conclusions that are far too complex to begin to address and simple enough to contain in a four-word sentence: *Writer, meet your Reader*

The writer who presents work in a workshop has the benefit of finding out how a reader reacts to what they have written. The writing reader reads with more knowledge of the techniques used in producing a text than a non-writing reader. The creative writing course generally “affords the student the opportunity of comparing theories of how texts come into being with the actual experience of bringing texts into being.” (Monteith *et al.* 1992: 4). Students are forming or measuring their work against ones that they believe already exist. That whole process further contributes to formation of more theory which can be used in the production of more texts. An undergraduate student involved in this process is already a researcher.

However, the readers students meet in the undergraduate creative writing workshop may not be the most natural. Even if they are admirers of the type of play being presented, they will read more critically and more objectively than the normal reactive reader. Chances are, anyway, the particular readers in any one group will have different interests from the writer. I can safely say that in all the groups I’ve taught in the Final Portfolio module, I’ve never had two writers who write exactly the

same sort of material. Thank goodness. Yet even these supercritical, highly skilled students know what an ordinary reader expects; they were that creature for years and can usually plug in those eyes.

I actually make it part of my session to invite the writer who is being critiqued to ask for specific feed back. There may be a particular aspect of their work they are concerned about. Are they showing or are they telling? Does a particular non-conventional use of language actually work or is it just confusing for the reader? Is a particular plot point convincing? We start there. However, we always allow time for what else everyone has noticed. Sometimes, in dealing with the detail, the writer has overlooked a glaring flaw in overall structure. Conversely, sometimes changing a small detail can make a huge difference. We're careful also to mention what is working well and to try and unpick why it works. As we go along, we all learn from each other, the lecturer included. I've frequently seen something working or not working in a student's work and then been able to go back and address something similar in my own.

Writers start with a picture in their head. They write their story and hope that the reader gains the same picture. I encourage students to ask others in the group specific questions about the characters they have created. A really interesting test is to ask about what is not explicit in the text. For example, we may have read a piece of dialogue that does clearly show us that a young man is struggling with his relationship with his parents. We are given no details about his physical appearance yet if the piece is well written, the answer to the question "What does he look like?" may be strikingly accurate. The good writer has written with his / her in-depth knowledge of the character. They have really shown instead of told and seemingly by magic, other information has been carried across the ether. For poets, we might look at mood and emotion. This is a really useful exercise within the workshop – at any level. I happen to do it with my undergraduates.

### ***Some concerns***

The creative writing workshop at undergraduate level is not without its problems. One may be the tutor's knowledge. We are four professional writers: two poets, completely different from each other, one of whom is also a playwright and translator

and two fiction writers, one of whom specialises in writing for children and young adults. We also employ hourly-paid tutors who have influenced our students on earlier modules and so our students have met another playwright and another fiction writer. These tutors will be working with Final Portfolio students this year. It isn't our lack of expert knowledge that is the problem. We probably all know enough about the general principles of all writing to be able to offer advice and insights even about areas in which we don't write. If we're lucky enough to get a student who knows more than we do, there is cause for celebration. We can bring templates and frameworks from our own genre to objectify their reasoning somewhat. It only causes a problem sometimes in the students' perception: 'What would he know about poetry? He writes short stories?'

It is actually our expert knowledge which can be a problem: it can make us hypercritical in our formative marking and rather strict in our summative marking. We are also in danger of talking above the heads of our students. We are all graduates, with up to three degrees each, and writing professionals with years of experience. Our students are undergraduates with limited life-experience in most cases and usually also limited writing experience. This considered, they are actually doing rather well.

Occasionally – and it is really only very occasionally in this particular workshop – a student will become defensive of their work. It is quite hard to receive criticism of work that you have done your very best with, which you have thought out carefully and which you know so well. Every word, you believe, has been put there for a specific purpose. The student may realise that the feedback makes sense, but nevertheless want to apologise for their weakness or oversight. Reactions may therefore range from "Oh, no, I always do that!" through "If you'd read the earlier chapter, you would already know he was in his mid-twenties." to "Well, you see, I'm trying to make every line have the same number of syllables." It is best to train the students out of this. We begin this process in our workshopping in earlier modules. Some critique groups actually opt to have writers remain silent as feedback is given. They are sometimes even asked not to defend or explain their work at all at the meeting, but to go away, think about it, perhaps produce a new draft and bring that back to the meeting. I personally don't do that unless the students ask for it. I prefer a slightly less formal atmosphere. However, often students will present the amended



work again later. Other members of the group are pleased to see how their comments have been applied.

Students do not always necessarily feel comfortable about giving feedback to peers, even when they are now in their third year of doing this. Are they expert enough to comment? How will their classmates react to what they say? What might the tutor think of what they are saying? This then produces a question for me: Should I, as a tutor, dazzle and inhibit them with my knowledge? After all, they pay their fees to access that knowledge. On the other hand, perhaps one of the ultimate purposes of this particular seminar is to encourage independent reflection on creative work. I therefore sometimes invite my students to comment first, sometimes I comment first or I allow the writer to comment first. If I go first, I really talk them through the written comments mentioned above – the positive first, the not so positive next, and then the advice. I then allow the other students to comment, finally going through any of the nitty-gritty annotations not mentioned already, but emphasising again the positives. Some will still find this a little harsh and just one or two will find it not harsh enough. The trick then is to adapt according to the student. ..

The words “I like” and “I don’t like ... so much” are often used in the workshop and if they are used with their literal meaning, they have no place there. Hopefully these are euphemisms for describing what has been successful or not in a text. Personal opinion is fine, but used in this context, it must be justified as it would have to be in any academic essay. In any case, most members of this workshop are reading as writers and are partly deconstructing the text, using a discourse associated with ‘*explication de texte*’ or close reading. It really is more about appreciating than liking. A critical reader can appreciate the appropriate use of skills and techniques employed in the production of texts they do not enjoy as a natural reader. There is the danger, however, that the members of a particular critique group, and indeed, members of a whole community of writers, may become set upon only accepting certain forms and theories of writing and may reject anything but that which conforms to this theory. They may overlook the brilliant and innovative which shines out beyond any personal opinion which is too theory bound.

We do not mark the final assessments of the students we teach. This has the added advantage that we cannot become embroiled in discussions about what grade a

piece of work might achieve. It is our task, week by week, regardless of amount of natural talent of the students within our care, to facilitate the optimum progress in their writing. As we have seen above, it is healthier, anyway, not to give grades for formative assessments. This is all very convenient. A more important truth, however, is that it is actually impossible to remain objective once one has already seen a text. We may recognise that Character X is now more rounded, but, as we have met him before, and know a considerable amount about him, it is certain that we are actually applying some theory of characterisation rather than encountering him as natural reader would. As a professional writer, I also enjoy giving comments about the others' work and receiving feedback on my work within a circle of committed, supportive peers. I make it my practice now also to share a text with another committed reader or reader / writer before I send it out for publication. This reader has never seen my text before. I encourage my students also to do this. Before they commit the final piece for assessment, they should show it to someone from another group who will be honest with them.

If one gives a lecture to fifty students, one should expect to meet a range of abilities and expectation. When one has a tutorial workshop group of four students, surprisingly there is also a range of abilities and expectations. There are often very talented writers within the group and some who struggle. It is our task to help the writer to progress, whatever level they are currently at.

We do balance the members of each group of four in other ways also. There is always a gender balance as far as is possible, taking into account also the gender of the tutor. This module lasts two semesters, so the groupings are rearranged for the second semester. Each student is with different students and different tutors in the second semester. As far as possible, we arrange contact with four tutors – two who mark their work and two who facilitate the workshops. The final projects on which the students embark can only be second-guessed by us, but we deliberately steer away from having four students in one group who are likely to want to produce the same type of work. There is also a variety of talent, motivation, and individual progress to date within each group. So, there are at least six points of difference between students within each group. This keeps the facilitator on their toes, yet is quite healthy in

offering the student variety. By looking at and listening to the feedback of others on work which is not of their genre, students remain less theory bound. The tutor needs to be aware of the six concerns of each individual within the group, however, and not allow a student to become overwhelmed, frustrated or bored. In order to ask questions which stretch the individual student just enough, I need to know the students well.

When looking at very personal material like this, we could sometimes find students expecting us to act as counsellors. We actually do not have those skills, beyond what any competent teacher who happens to also be a Personal Tutor has as part of their job. The key is to know how and when to direct any stressed students to the appropriate support divisions within the university. We rarely meet such problems in Level 3 possibly because if we meet them at all, it is in Level 1, in our Introduction to Creative Writing where we use autobiography as content. At this point we give the option of avoiding painful memories, advise responsibility for one's own feelings, and again point any students who feel that they have unearthed something which is emotionally too demanding to appropriate support bodies. It is crucial to be absolutely clear about this.

### ***Some further thoughts***

There may be a danger that the workshop can lead to a uniformity of text which ultimately leads to the death of literature. Katharine Coles warns of this fear (Coles 2006: 8). The perfect workshop story may become boringly formulaic and prevents other more interesting texts from shining out. However, surely the purpose of the workshop is not to be a marshal or act as a gatekeeper of texts on their way towards publication, but rather to offer a training ground for students to become their own best critics. They learn when to take advice and when to leave it, when to rely on their own now finely-tuned intuition and how to ask for insights efficiently when they are too close to a text to see either its faults or its strengths.

An interesting question also is who should teach the workshop? Professional writers can obviously write well. Often, however, they cannot articulate how they manage to do that, nor understand how others cannot, nor remember their own first faltering steps. We are back again with the over-qualified expert who is in danger of going above the head of the student. Perhaps, then, it should be the creative writing

academic, who has probably gone through a similar process to the student.. They have learnt to look at the writing process critically and have something to offer their students. However, their expertise may come into question. If they are so good at writing, why are they not churning out best-sellers and earning a lot more money than they would in academia? So maybe it's the expert teacher who should facilitate the workshop. They would probably do it well, but what are they actually teaching and with what authority if they do not have the critical or creative expertise of the other two characters? Probably those facilitating undergraduate creative writing workshops are a mixture of all three characters and actually need to keep them in balance. At this point we can come back to the question of why the competent or even talented writer is working in academia. Maybe they are pushing some boundaries which go beyond the commercial, and maybe this, anyway, is part of the function of a university.

The material with which we are dealing in a creative writing undergraduate workshop is substantially different from that which our students meet and engage with in English Literature courses. Their agenda in looking at that material also tends to be different from the one they have in their English Literature classes. This leads to a different way of being in this type of seminar. Robert Miles (1992:40) describes this:

The members of the seminar will find themselves involved on several levels: the group collectively, comes to a view; each individual is involved in a similar project; each member of the group has invested their own sensitivities in their work. All three levels of involvement will come into play as the group decided whether or not the ending works. At the same time, because it is their own work, creative writing raises in an acute form the issues of authority and ownership. (40)

Miles further argues that partly because of this, a feature of the creative writing workshop is that the tutor loses some of their authority. They become, instead, a fellow professional helping the writer whose work is being scrutinized to perfect their text. It's an intense process and justifies the word "work" in its label.

### *Some strategies*

In view of some of the problems and concerns outlined above my colleagues and I have introduced certain procedures into our workshops. From the outset, in our Introduction to Creative Writing, these procedures are negotiated with the students. Of course, the tutor can suggest ideas, and mention what has worked in other workshops. Ideas generated between students and tutors have included thoughts about:

- how compulsory participation should be
- how participation is defined - can it mean just sitting and listening?
- commitment to the process
- how work might be shared
- how comments are never personal
- the logistics of sharing work

It is extremely useful to have a list like this. If the workshop is not running well, you can remind the students of what they have negotiated and that this is what they chose to do. If it still does not work, it may be time for renegotiation. By the time a student reaches our Level 3 Final Portfolio class, they may have worked in a variety of workshops with a variety of students and staff. In addition, they move on as workshop participants. It is always, therefore, advisable to renegotiate workshop etiquette at the beginning of any module which contains a workshop element. This is still true at Level 3, especially in a module which is delivered entirely as a workshop. However, it will probably never take as long again as it did in that first Level 1 class.

A very firm set of workshop rules, however, might be quite daunting for a Level 1 student, who has never taken part in a creative writing workshop. There is a case for teaching them workshop skills. This would include some focus on the process and allowing them to unpick it themselves. We should ask them what the purpose of the workshop is. We can make them aware of its advantages and how to maximise these. We can point out its disadvantages and how to combat those. We can teach them how to give constructive feedback and how to receive and react to that feedback. We can ask them to work individually, then in pairs, then in smaller groups and finally in a full workshop. There is certainly enough content in doing this to fill a complete module, and one which should appear early on in a Creative Writing

programme. It is possible that the best time to negotiate rules for a practical workshop is at the end of one of these introductory modules when the student is aware of all the issues.

The workshop, if well facilitated, is such a valuable learning tool that not a second should be wasted. Yet life happens. The buses stop running. The printer breaks down. Students fail to turn up to class or fail to submit work on time for all the best reasons. Yet the others are there and raring to go. They must be offered something. I encourage students to bring along anything else they would like us to look at if there is time. It may mean they have to read out instead of everyone having a copy, but, depending on where you're teaching, it may be possible to run to a photocopier or project the student's work from a memory stick. I also have a creative writing or editing exercise with me, just in case, but have rarely had to use that, and indeed usually only in response to students asking me to show them how I edit, rather than as a stop-gap.

There is always the option, as well, for students to talk about what they have been reading. I offer this to those who should be sharing work but who haven't managed to do so. Writers do have to read – except for a handful of very experienced ones who do not want to be influenced by other writers – and our students are not that experienced yet. Indeed, we expect an annotated bibliography to accompany our assessed assignments. Sharing reading is a very valid workshop activity.

Having something for the first few minutes of the seminar workshop and after the break – we always take a comfort break in any seminar of two hours or more – is also essential. I use that time to ask students how everything is going. We sometimes discuss what they are reading. We all source and publicise suitable competitions, publishing opportunities and readings for our students. Students at all levels are in the habit of looking out for literature about such opportunities as they arrive. If I have work to give back that we are not going to be looking at during the session, I give it back at that point. Students can read my comments and digest them and ask questions then or at the end of the session. All of this creates a busy, work-focussed atmosphere right from the beginning. We start at about seven minutes past the hour, or when it looks as if the majority of students are there and settled whichever comes first. Latecomers are inevitable, but they sneak in quietly and join in promptly.

We are quite fortunate on our programme of English and Creative Writing to have mainly deep learners. Few of our students are interested only in getting a degree. They want to learn as much as they can about writing. They have chosen the university route to do this. They tend therefore to take the creative writing workshop seriously. By the end, many of them are relying more and more on their own inner critic. They take part in the dialogue that exists between writers. They listen carefully to what other writers say about their work. They weigh up all the advice they are given. They take particular notice if three or more people say the same thing, especially if it is about something they are not in such a good position to be able to judge for themselves. They then use their own judgement to decide exactly what to do with their own text. They have started to develop a skill which they will now take years to perfect, a skill which is an essential component of being a writer.

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