

My Writers' Workshop Philosophy

By Alex Clark-McGlenn

The Writers' Workshop is a perceived set of rules most recently set, though never in stone, by the famed Iowa Writers' Workshop. Since the rise of the writers' workshop, and the MFA, there has been little, if any, reflection on who the traditional writers' workshop serves, and/or why.

Like most institutions in the United States, the rules have been created by and, either consciously or sub-consciously, for the benefit of white, straight, cis-gendered, men. In a homogenous community of writers the classic "Iowa model" may, indeed, serve all at the table in equal measures. However, the real dangers of a cultural and uniformed echo chamber are a certainty (and that is another problem altogether). So the question, with very little pedagogical research to draw on, is, as Zoe Bossiere put it, ". . . how do we, as teachers, facilitate a creative writing workshop that will work for all of our students?" (1) There is no one-size-fits-all in this endeavor. What may be beneficial to one student may, or is even likely, not beneficial to another. How then do I, as a facilitator, create an equitable writers' workshop?

The first, and seemingly most obvious step one can take as a facilitator, is to know students. I seek to know students neither as friends nor as writers, but as people with varied

backgrounds and genuine curiosity about things *other* than writing. The importance of this is two-fold: first, it is essential to acknowledge what cannot be seen. A thorough understanding of students' cultures, pleasures, and general interests helps facilitators understand where and what drives students' creative work.

Second, encouraging students to know each other in ways beyond that of academic work. This is not to say every student needs to be friends, or share personal experiences they would not typically share with a stranger, but rather acknowledge the expertise and lived experiences each person brings to the workshop. Students' life experiences and cultural knowledge is essential for the success of the workshop.

Creative writing, and more specifically, fiction, be it literary or genre, is a closed subject. That is, to write a thorough and interesting piece of fiction requires more than an interest in the form itself. Surely an interest of any genre informs aspects of a writer's creation, but it is not the subject of their writing unless they seek to delve into the murky depths of meta-fiction. No, by and large, fiction is about something other than itself. Fiction is its own antithesis. It is a form or medium, but not the subject of great storytelling (at least not often). This is why an understanding, even if only a surface level understanding, of writers' backgrounds and extended interests, is important. It creates a student-centered approach to the writers' workshop that is sadly lacking in the Iowa Model.

For all the talk and discussion and trends toward student-centered, culturally and emotionally responsive teaching from K-12 to college, the writers' workshop has yet to benefit. The reason for this is due to the still white-washed nature of the writers' workshop and the prevalence of the Iowa Method. Again, fiction does not and should not exist in a vacuum.

However, for so long writers' workshops and MFAs treated anything that acknowledged race (and so culture, other than whiteness) as politicized and outside the realm of Literature. As Junot Diaz put it,

“Race was the unfortunate condition of nonwhite people that had nothing to do with white people and as such was not a natural part of the Universal of Literature, and anyone that tried to introduce racial consciousness to the Great (White) Universal of Literature would be seen as politicizing the Pure Art and betraying the (White) Universal (no race) ideal of True Literature.” (2)

What Diaz refers to above, is literature with a capital L. The type of fiction and nonfiction that sets itself apart as “serious.” This is typically not considered genre. Rather, it is typified by the cold objectiveness of “showing, not telling,” and leaves more room for ambiguity than for the address of crucial issues facing writers of historically marginalized and silenced experiences, cultures, and backgrounds. For too long, Literature and writers' workshops (including the one I attended at my MFA), asked writers to prefer “showing” over “telling.” As Sonya Huber explains it, “Evaluating our lives cinematically makes us prefer certain stories over other stories. It means that certain stories don't get told.” (4) Furthermore, it means different styles and traditions of storytelling are devalued and thrown aside as “ineffective.” This cipher of cold objectivity may serve literature with a capital L very well, as defined by whiteness. However, it does not serve writers of a diverse nature. Instead, it reinforces itself in what is “good” writing and,

“typically focus[es] on strategies of the writing ‘art’ that develop character, setting, time, description, theme, voice and, to a lesser extent, plot. Plot is usually

seen by workshop writer-teachers, or teacher-writers, as the property of so-called 'genre' writing: science fiction, crime, romance, young adult and screenplays — as if literary fiction were not also a genre,"(3) says Viet Thanh Nguyen.

But in doing so Literature distances itself in its attempt at realism from that which it seeks to mirror. It confronts none of the pressing matters of black Americans, LatinX immigrants, children of refugees, or refugees themselves. The list of the silenced in the name of Literature could go on, but I will not do so here. The truth is, anyone and everyone is capable of writing "serious" Literature (with a capital L). Serious fiction exists in every genre and is written by any person. That is what the workshop *can* strive to be if only we would make it so.

Of course, not every writer must write serious literature. Some writers may seek to entertain first and provoke deep thought later. It is an equally valuable art form to write a well crafted, compelling story that makes readers turn the page with excitement rather than with an earnest nod of the head. The workshop can find value in all creative works if only the audience is understood to be a specific kind of reader. That's why we're all at the workshop, after all. We all want to be read.

I always encourage students to write for an audience in mind. An important part of the writing process, even if it's subconscious, is determining who the piece on hand is for. Who is your audience and what do they expect to get from your story? This isn't to say any story should be predictable, but readers of say, high fantasy, do have expectations of the genre, just as readers of romance novels have expectations, as do literary fiction readers. When most young or new writers think of the accolades they hope to get for their work it is from people who wrote books

or stories they admire. But writers also think of those who are established in a scene or club, that garners mystique.

“The writers with megaphones in my mind were not Mary Austin, or Louise Erdrich, or Joan Didion, or Joy Williams, or Toni Morrison... I wanted to write something Cormac McCarthy would like, something Thomas Pynchon would come out of hiding to endorse, something David Foster Wallace would blurb from beyond the grave,” writes Claire Vaye Watkins. (5)

Watkins, even as an accomplished author, herself, strived for the approval of those who were faces of the industry, nevermind the industry was specifically structured to lend more value to their voices and stories than to those of women, or black and brown people. Who is it we want to impress and why? Is it for awards and glory? The craft of writing is the most lonely of arts (though some would contend it is not an art, I humbly disagree). There are few if any performances, there is little or no facetime with admirers, and it demands an audience that is not only willing to spend money but also hours of time understanding your work. It is, therefore, imperative for writers in a writers’ workshop to dispose of, or at least leave at the door, their hopes of literary giant bequeathed accolades. When a native student writes a tale in the style of the oral tradition of their tribe, is it written for me? Surely not! So why then, am I the facilitator to pass the “effectiveness” judgment on the writing? It is not meant for me, but it is writing nonetheless and writing is a form of communication. As the facilitator, I must ask, do the words that form sentences, and the sentences that form paragraphs, and paragraphs that form the page, say and do what the author intends them to do? That is my role as a writers’ workshop facilitator—to guide students in their attempts to say what they have to say, to say what they

must, to say what they have been deprived of for so long. The writers' workshop is what we choose to make it and better for these different pedagogical ways of thinking.

- 1) <https://www.essaydaily.org/2019/10/zoe-bossiere-student-centered-approach.html>
- 2) <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/mfa-vs-poc>
- 3) <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/26/books/review/viet-thanh-nguyen-writers-workshops.html>
- 4) <https://lithub.com/the-three-words-that-almost-ruined-me-as-a-writer-show-dont-tell/>
- 5) <https://tinhouse.com/on-pandering/>