Method and Madness in the Creative Writing Workshop

The “studio” approach to creative writing, made famous and even glamorous by the Iowa Writer’s Workshop, is the dominant way American schools teach the writing of fiction and poetry. Workshops—particularly Iowa’s—have produced many notable writers in recent decades; however, I have concluded that the workshop method, as currently practiced in many writing programs, including the one where I earned my MFA, is faulty and needs modification. Why? Because I realized during my very first workshop in 1994 that the emphasis would be on failure instead of success. It was a shock, and I didn’t quite know how to express my frustration until I saw it articulated so well by Madison Smartt Bell in *Narrative Design: A Writer’s Guide to Structure* (W. W. Norton, 1997), in which he asserts that “Fiction workshops are inherently almost incapable of recognizing success. The fiction workshop is designed to be a fault-finding mechanism; its purpose is to diagnose and prescribe” (6).

As Bell discovered when he finally taught for a year at Iowa, the workshop method of submitting a story to be critiqued, which involves, say, fifteen people taking copies home and returning them to the author the following week with suggestions, generally produces merely fifteen sets of advice based on a belief that every story has yet to be properly assembled. Certainly what happens in many workshops is that students assume, because it is student work to be judged, that it must be flawed, and the workshop goal then becomes a quest to ferret out the flaws. This approach often fails to recognize that a story might be ready—or nearly ready, with some revisions—for publication. Instead, the dazed writer is left holding a pile of annotated copies of his or her manuscript, and the advice isn’t always helpful. I once sat next to a nice fellow with good intentions who solemnly advised me to “get some car crashes in your story—like on television.”

And there is a potentially greater evil in what I call the “fiction by committee” approach. Workshop members can easily become arbiters/censors, dispensing verdicts on what is good writing and even on what should be written. The decisions are often based, unfortunately, on the latest trendy “stories” students have read, which all too often are little more than barren sketches. As John W. Aldridge points out in *Talents and Technicians: Literary Chic and the New Assembly Line Fiction* (Scribner’s, 1991), many of today’s stories are “rather wispy moments of experience during which nothing particular happens and out of which arises no large revelation or crescendo of meaning but at most some faint murmur of irony or pity that is often so faint as to be inaudible” (30). Aldridge blames television for much of the recent crop of fiction that is the result of a generation “whose perceptions have been doped and dulled by years of exposure to the electronic anesthesia of that medium” (30). I agree.

But it’s not just the assumption by workshop students that every story is probably a failure, or that the workshop has the only valid view of what
should be written and how it should be written
that compels me to argue for modification of the
method. Perhaps the most maddening aspect of a
workshop occurs when students refuse to deal with
the manuscript in their hands and instead base
their critiques on what they would do if they were
writing the story. Again, the result is usually fifteen
versions of how a story should be instead of useful
feedback on how well, for example, dialogue is
working, or whether the writer's narrative voice is
appropriate or appealing—or how well the plot
works. Is there a plot? For those comments I had to
rely on my teachers and a very few graduate stu-
dents whose work I respected and on whom I
could depend for honesty.

Here's what we have to do about all this:
First, workshop leaders, the respected professional
writers teaching creative writing, must continually
remind students that a story can arrive in a work-
shop ready for publication or in need of only minor
repairs. There will always be stories that are clunk-
ers, and we must recognize them and help writers
to improve, but let's shift the emphasis from search-
ning for failure to recognizing success whenever pos-
sible. Let's not desperately look for ways to diagnose
failure as a way of reinforcing a ridiculous and erro-
neous belief that all workshop stories are broken.

Second, teachers must be ready to step in
when necessary to help students assess a story as it
is written instead of how it might be done if some-
one else were writing it. Teachers must make sure
that students who offer advice on another student's
writing do so with specific, reasonable evidence of
why changes should be made. Students must not
go unchallenged when they base their critiques on
vague statements such as, “This doesn't sound
right to me,” or “I don't think this character would
say that.”

Third, many creative writing teachers must
stop resting on their reputations and become more
involved in workshops. It's simply not acceptable
for a teacher to assume that all he or she has to do
is ignite a discussion and then sit back and listen for
several hours before scurrying home. I want teach-
ers to take time to go over plot, characterization,
voice, setting, point of view, and anything else that
will help students be better writers. I would also
like teachers to abandon their seats, locate black-
boards, and diagram student stories, if that's what it
takes to demonstrate how stories are constructed.

Teachers should also bring in real stories by
writers who have something to say and explain why
the stories are successful. Writers should not ac-
cept money from schools to teach creative writing
unless they are there to teach and not just soak up
a salary so they can afford to continue their own
work. One of my teachers once told me that he
considered teaching a privilege. It showed in his
workshops. He cared, and he spent time with stu-
dents. When I was his student he lived ninety
miles away and taught full-time at another uni-
versity, but he never failed to linger after class or
meet with students at a restaurant before the long
drive home.

Fourth, we must find a better way to teach
creative writing than the workshop method cur-
rently practiced in so many programs. I confess
that I have not yet invented the new model. I keep
pondering it, but all I can come up with so far is the
sobering conclusion that perhaps all we can do is
reduce the damage done in workshops. For exam-
ple, instead of fiction by large committee, maybe it
would be better to have each story evaluated by a
panel of no more than three students, whose mem-
bership changes with each story. This way the
writer has only three editors to deal with instead of
fifteen or more, with the hope that the panel's com-
ments will be balanced by the professional writer
leading the workshop.

A panel might reduce the effects of the cor-
rupt, free-for-all atmosphere that easily degener-
ates into a group admonishment that can inhibit
writers into thinking they are wrong to write stories
more ambitious or stylistically different (with plots,
for example) than the narrow limits the group is
promoting. Anyone not on the three-student panel
for a particular story can always catch the writer after
class or at a bar, or even just write that person a
note. And if the panel can reduce the atmosphere of
endless comments that, in addition to being tyrann-
ical, can also become unfocused and irrelevant,
then there will be more time to submit stories to the
workshop. I was disappointed to learn in my first
workshop that I had only to submit three or four
stories. That was pretty much the way it was in every
workshop I attended. Sometimes there were oppor-
tunities for more, but I couldn't count on it. One of
the greatest barriers to submitting more work is the
amount of time wasted when a discussion is allowed
to go well past the point of productivity.
Finally, it wouldn’t be a bad idea from time to time to shift the workshop focus away from how we write to why we write. A writer’s inner workings, the creative process—whatever that is—is worth talking about, even if, I suspect, it’s not something upon which a consensus can or should be reached. But sharing with other writers how stories are conceived and nurtured is just the type of discussion that might help writers understand what happened to them personally when they wrote certain stories. Did a story satisfy a need for catharsis that the writer didn’t realize until how the story came together was discussed with other writers? Could be. Is that important? Probably, and it’s a discussion certainly worth having sometimes, even if just one writer finds it useful to understand why he or she wrote something.

Most writing, it seems to me, is an attempt to understand, to give form to something that seems formless in our heads. So let’s shift the focus away from fiction by committee and nurture the individual writing identities that should emerge from a workshop but that are too often stymied by too much advice from too many editors. And while we’re at it, let’s not forget that discussions about why we write will provide timely breaks from writing as well as a source for introspection that writers might use to harness thoughts—give them form—and then convert them into voices.

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Teen Read Week

The American Library Association (ALA) has declared October 17–23, 1999, the second annual Teen Read Week. The goal is to let teens know that reading is not just a crucial skill, but that it’s “cool” and can be done anywhere—for free. Teachers can help teens build reading habits that lead to better grades and a lifetime of learning and enjoyment by doing the following:

- Collaborate with school librarians to promote reading for fun.
- Ask librarians to give regular book talks about books students will enjoy.
- Keep a book you are reading for enjoyment close at hand and visible.
- Talk about your reading interests with your students.
- Read aloud to your students.
- Read some of the books your students are reading.
- Recommend some books to your students.
- Show excitement and interest in the art and skill of reading and the books that are being read.
- Make time in your classes every day for a reading experience.
- Talk to other teachers about the importance of reading for fun.
- Ask the administration to consider a sustained, silent reading period for your school.