

WORKSHOP

Loosely defined, the workshop model of artistic development is probably as old as art itself. Historians believe that ancient Egyptian sculpture and wall paintings, for instance, were the result of a communal effort involving both skilled artisans and those in training. Certainly, the medieval craft guilds exerted an influence on apprentice-master relations in the arts, and Renaissance painters often employed underlings who would complete the uninteresting background work for a master painter, just as Renaissance playwrights occasionally relied on apprentices to help finish their plays.

In the context of twentieth-century American literature, however, the word “workshop” has come to have a fairly specific meaning. Although D. G. Myers argues in “Educating Writers: The Beginnings of ‘Creative Writing’ in the American University” (1989) that the pedagogical practices we now take for granted have their roots in Harvard’s late-nineteenth-century freshman composition courses, the more obvious source of the writing workshop is the University of Iowa’s creative writing program. Begun in 1930 by Norman Foerster, the program awarded its first MFA to Paul Engle (later head of the program) and gradually expanded, eventually producing a dozen Pulitzer Prize winners and three U.S. Poet Laureates. Among the prominent writers who have graduated from the Iowa Writers’ Workshop are Robert Bly, Raymond Carver, Rita Dove, Andre Dubus, John Irving, Donald Justice, Tracy Kidder, Philip Levine, Flannery O’Connor, Jane Smiley, William Stafford, Wallace Stegner, Mark Strand, and Margaret Walker. With success breeding success, and the Iowa graduates themselves becoming college professors, the hegemony of the workshop model was quickly established, its naturalness as the dominant form of pedagogy becoming a matter of common sense.

Over time, several shared qualities have emerged in most American creative writing workshops. Typically, the student whose work is under discussion will pass his story, play, poem, or essay out the class period before

it is to be workshopped (the noun has long since also become a verb). The other students read and comment on the draft at home, then the piece is discussed in class. In order to avoid sessions that amount to nothing more than an extended self-defense of the work, the author is normally asked not to speak while discussion of his manuscript is in progress. After the workshop, students return their marked copies to further guide the writer's revisions. Anyone who has ever had the full attention of fifteen or twenty fellow writers trained on her work knows it can be a harrowing process. As Jan Ramjerdi writes, "What most characterizes the workshops, distinguishing them from academic classrooms, is their *intensity*, deriving, I think, from the fact that *more is at stake in the workshop than in the academic classroom*. . . . [T]here is no object of study that filters, directs, constrains, and distances responses as there is in academic classes" (Ramjerdi and Garber 1994, 14).

If the workshop personalizes literary criticism, it also implies that writing is a craft. Yet creative writing instructors tend to take this idea for granted and remain unaware of the significance it has for their pedagogy. Most importantly, the workshop model suggests that writing, like carpentry, *can be* both learned and taught. While the qualities that make a master carpenter—a feel for wood, a knowledge of the appropriate tools, precision, perceptiveness, and so on—may be as elusive as those that make a master writer, the assumption is that just about anyone can become functional in the craft. And, indeed, that is what has happened in creative writing—to the chagrin of those editors who complain of a deluge of mind-numbingly uniform work, of McPoems and McStories. Nevertheless, the workshop *has* led to an unprecedented democratization of imaginative writing in America. Now that nearly every American high school and community college offers at least one creative writing class, access to basic instruction in the art is widely available.

Still, not all assessments of the writing workshop are positive. From a pragmatic point of view, there is the cost and inconvenience of distributing manuscripts, which can be particularly problematic in community colleges (see "Two-Year Colleges"). Many two-year (and some four-year) college students simply cannot afford the \$20–40 it requires to photocopy a short story. And while sending work via e-mail circumvents financial issues, not everyone has Internet access, attachments may not open or they may be infected with viruses, and it is surprisingly difficult to get a full class of students to remember to print out manuscripts and bring them to class.

Moreover, once the workshop begins, students often find it difficult to sort through the sometimes wildly varying responses from their peers. If Jim raves about the characterization of the protagonist while Joan finds it absolutely spiritless, does the author entirely ignore one or the other respondent, or does she split the difference and try to accommodate both? Moreover, because the author is effectively silenced during the discussion of her piece, the potentially dialogic nature of the workshop is muted, while the New Critical assumption that the work should speak for itself is reinforced (see Roskelly 1998). Too, there is the question of the instructor's role in the workshop. Does she use her superior wisdom and experience to firmly guide the classroom give-and-take, thereby undercutting the authority of student comments, or does she adopt a less directive position and place herself in the role of fellow writer and "co-learner," possibly allowing patently bad advice to go unaddressed?

In part because of conundrums like these, in the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s the heavy reliance on workshops by creative writing faculty came under increasing scrutiny. In three edited collections—Joseph Moxley's *Creative Writing in America: Theory and Pedagogy* (1989), Wendy Bishop and Hans Ostrom's *Colors of a Different Horse: Rethinking Creative Writing Theory and Pedagogy* (1994), and David Starkey's *Teaching Writing Creatively* (1998)—contributors again and again point to the absence of any sustained theoretical approach in creative writing classes (see "Theory"). Ostrom sees instructor laziness, as much as anything else, as the reason for the workshop's popularity: "Most probably, those who retreat from theory and pedagogy are likely to fall back on the workshop in its simplest form: 'going over' poems and stories in a big circle, holding forth from time to time, pretending to have read the material carefully, breaking up squabbles like a hall monitor, marking time" (xiv). Some critics contend that the workshop should be replaced with instruction in literature, while others complain that ideological assumptions about what constitutes "good" writing are rarely questioned in the workshop because good writing is essentially whatever the instructor and the class say it is.

Obviously, the writing workshop has become an increasingly contested site in English studies. While advocates claim the workshop's emphasis on consensus and compromise is helping to build a national literature notable for its moral sense and ability to consider multiple points of view, detractors believe a herd mentality predominates, that all individuality is being lost. Yet whichever point of view eventually triumphs, there can no doubt that, for the foreseeable future, the writing workshop

will continue to provide the most prevalent form of feedback to young creative writers.