

# Writing Workshops and the Mechanics of Change

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Good education doesn't happen by administrative fiat or by senate legislation nor does it happen abstractly. If it happens at all, it does so because teachers teach from conviction about things they know to students who care. But even committed teachers do not always engage serious students in their passions. Sometimes engagement fails because of circumstances beyond faculty control—teaching load, class size, institutional morale, and the like. And sometimes it fails because conditions which could be changed are not—the design of assignments, teaching strategies, classroom settings, and evaluation procedures—for even committed faculty sometimes run short of options for change. Writing workshops can change that. The institution of the writing workshop, because it presents faculty with new options for teaching writing, has now become an intentional agent of meaningful educational change.

## Definitions

Writing workshops have made "in-service" respectable for secondary and college teachers alike. Since the mid-1970s interdisciplinary writing workshops have developed into a major mode of introducing theoretical and practical ideas about writing, teaching, and learning to instructors in virtually every academic discipline (Maimon; Freisinger). The idea behind "workshop"—as opposed to "seminar" or "lecture" or "presentation"—is that participants *participate* in the learning process and in the development of knowledge directly. Workshops also imply—at least to me—a fairly long period of time at one sitting (with breaks, of course), an in-depth or intense experience, and a group small enough that the voices of all participants are heard. Finally, workshops usually generate a product, the result of something worked on; in a carpentry workshop one creates a table or chair, in a writing workshop one creates an idea, story, or lesson plan.

During the last decade, I have participated in numerous writing workshops designed to introduce new ideas about teaching with writing to instructors in all subject areas. These interdisciplinary writing workshops are aimed at teachers, professors, or administrators at all instructional levels. They are aimed most pointedly at teachers who are not

writing teachers, but who want to learn more about assigning, assessing, and responding to student writing in classroom settings.

The actual ideas introduced at such workshops have become widely accepted in the field of rhetoric and composition and are widely practiced by process-oriented writing teachers at all grade levels (Tate; Graves). Central among these ideas are the following: that writing is a complex process (Moffett; Emig), that writing is discovery (Britton; Elbow), that good writing depends on audience and purpose (Gibson; Kinneavy), that writing improves through revision (Murray; Sommers), that writing is a socially collaborative enterprise (Vygotsky; Bruffee), that writing and reading are mutually supportive activities (Smith; Rosenblatt), that significant learning is personal and developmental (Polyani; Bruner), and that ownership of language is access to power (Freire; Heath).

These ideas about language, in general, and writing, in particular, are central to learning in all subject areas. Candidly, I would describe most of these ideas as based more on the personal experience and common sense of writers than anything else. However, while these ideas may inform English programs, they have been less likely until recently to inform the rest of the curriculum. Introducing writing-process ideas to teachers long-schooled in product-oriented, evaluative approaches to writing requires, in many cases, the reversal of deep-seated convictions about the way language works cognitively as well as pedagogically.

Furthermore, it is obvious that these ideas directly relate to the teaching of writing; it is less obvious—but soon becomes so at writing workshops—that these ideas are also about student-centered teaching and learning throughout the whole curriculum. On the one hand, writing workshops challenge traditional classroom writing pedagogy; on the other hand, they challenge the nature of teaching and learning. In the beginning, in the mid-seventies, in places like Carleton College in Minnesota, Central College in Iowa, and Beaver College in Pennsylvania, few people imagined that writing workshops would have the power to transform curricula; today, many of us have seen it happen (Young and Fulwiler).

In the course of designing and conducting writing workshops at elementary and middle schools, private and public secondary schools, community colleges and research universities, I have learned—sometimes by intention, often by accident—why workshops are such powerful mechanisms of change, how they work, and when and why they don't work. This essay will not focus directly on the theories which underlie the writing-across-the-curriculum movements, as they have been amply explained in other places (see, for example, Fulwiler and Young; Griffin; McLeod). Instead, I would like to explain, as best I can, the *mechanics* of writing

workshops, the how that makes the why possible, because the how is their secret, the reason they work.

## Leader Qualities

Leading workshops well is different from lecturing well. Sometimes, in fact, the requisite skills are diametrically opposed, as the one requires the effective delivery of ideas to an audience while the other requires the effective elicitation of ideas *from* an audience. Sometimes an individual is equally skilled at both, more often not. Though most graduate schools train people to do neither one, the skills necessary to lead effective workshops are teachable.

I take as a given that some people cannot lead workshops of any kind because their personalities or social skills are not suited to it. For example, people who talk too much and don't listen well; who are always right and impatient with those who are not; who are authoritarian, elitist, and inflexible; who don't have confidence in themselves or their knowledge; or who cannot create structures of time and concept and stick to them. People with the opposite traits, however, are good bets to be good leaders of workshops.

To lead interdisciplinary writing workshops in academic settings, it is not necessary to be an especially skillful or creative writer—though that would be useful—nor to have an especially wide knowledge of great writing. It is, however, necessary (1) to know something about the relationship of language to learning, (2) to have studied the process by which writing is produced, as well as the factors which inhibit such production, and (3) to have an awareness of how “good teaching”—and “good learning”—occur.

It should be obvious that neither writing nor teaching is the privileged knowledge area of any one field of study: for example, college professors in all disciplines both teach and write as part of their daily work. However, most academics are people trained to view the world (and write about it) from a restricted disciplinary perspective, a training that ill suits them to be workshop leaders for colleagues in disciplines other than their own. Effective workshop leaders must not only be comfortable with the jargon of their own discipline, but possess the ability to speak beyond it to others, to make instant translations of the participant jargon they hear coming back at them, and to know when to ask for clarification on the behalf of others.

However, as a corollary, I have also come to expect that people with certain backgrounds or disciplinary training are likely to be especially good workshop leaders: (1) teachers involved in interdisciplinary

programs, because they have trained themselves to see all articulate connections to knowledge areas other than their own; (2) teachers in any discipline who care about *how*—as well as *what*—their students learn; (3) English teachers, because they are the great generalists (some would say dilettantes) of the curriculum, needing to know, for instance, some history, politics, geography, psychology, and sociology to teach even one Shakespeare play, Dickens' novel, or Alice Walker poem; and most likely of all, (4) English teachers who are writing teachers, because they have also trained themselves to listen carefully to what writers have to say. Of course, I generalize at great risk, as there are many exceptions to and variations of these categories, in both directions. To be more specific, here are the qualities which are absolutely necessary:

1. *Listening.* To lead a workshop well I must hear what participants are saying. I need to hear why they came in the first place (did they volunteer? were they asked? were they told?) I need to hear what they expected (to assign term papers better? to eradicate forever spelling errors from student papers? to overcome personal writing blocks?). And I need to hear the misinterpretations of my clearest directions; the misunderstandings when I mention that teaching grammar does not improve people's writing; and their mis-translations when I mention the term "course journal" and they hear instead "private diary."

I need to listen to teacher stories—the circumstances of their academic training, their personal experiences as students with writing, their frustrations as teachers responding to it. The more stories I can pick up as the workshop moves along, the more I can weave them into the fabric of the workshop—which creates heightened interest and engagement in the whole group (This isn't a canned presentation, is it?).

2. *Responding.* When I call on people, both asking and answering questions, I call on them by name. Name tags ("first names written large, readable at 20 feet, please") or table name tags ("a tri-fold sheet of paper does nicely—the hardest thing you'll have to do today") help. As in teaching, the more quickly I learn names, the more quickly the atmosphere becomes relaxed and friendly. I'm also looking, early on in a workshop, for someone with a sense of humor that I can play against, pick on in a friendly way, whom I can depend upon to enjoy it. What I want is some laughter—situational laughter—that will put the whole group at ease.

When I use participant responses to my questions ("What makes writing hard for you?") to amplify my agenda, I record their language, not mine, on a transparency or chalkboard. For example, if someone says "hostile readers" make writing hard, I don't change the language to "critical audience." Above all, I want participants to begin to own the workshop and the information generated therein: using their language validates their insights and helps them generate part of the day's lesson.

3. *Authority.* I use all I've got. It helps that I am an expert in my own field, that I have published articles and books, that I have a Ph.D. in a traditional discipline (English), and (better still) that I am tenured and promoted in a traditional academic department (English). And, when I do workshops at schools other than my own, it helps that I come from somewhere else. (Participants are aware that someone has gone to some expense to bring me in—so I must be an expert.)

But the authority I bring with me goes only so far. It helps especially in advertising and starting workshops, but once started, teachers find out directly if I'm any good or not, and no external credentials will bail me out. When I am a little short on authority (as, for instance, I am in my own department) I look for help: a co-leader who, for whatever reason, has more credibility than I do or an administrative sanction that, for some reason, people are willing to listen to. But when I do not have such help, I use these strategies:

(1) *A fast start.* I get people involved and doing something active—writing, solving problems, or looking at a prompt—in the first ten minutes of a workshop. This moves attention from me to the exercise and focuses participants' early critical energy on substantive issues rather than personalities.

(2) *A hands-on experience.* I like to pose good problems for people to solve—or provide them with an opportunity to pose problems themselves—that require discussion and group interaction for solution. In this way, participants quickly come to own the workshop.

(3) *References.* I don't spend a lot of time on this, but I have available (as parenthetical notes, as handouts, or on a browsing table) the readings, references, citations, and studies that back up my arguments, exercises, and illustrations.

4. *Flexibility.* Perhaps flexibility is obvious, but well worth mentioning, especially if one is a fanatic about time, task, and structure as I am. I plan my individual 60, 75, or 90 minute sessions down to the minute (5 minutes to freewrite; 3 minutes to share with a neighbor; 7 minutes for whole group processing, etc.) and I like to stick to my schedule. But if I were unable to deviate, modify, add, or subtract, all my careful plans would be for naught. People need to see that workshop leaders are willing to respond to their concerns *when* they raise them, *when* the concern is there. I can hold off questions only so long ("We'll get to that later") or I begin to lose people. (And if I promise "later," I make sure I get to it later). More and more now I answer questions when they come up—briefly if I've scheduled a later session to deal directly with it. I do so to show my willingness to follow their lead as well as my agenda. For example, I need to be flexible about (1) addressing issues participants want to cover

versus those I've planned for, (2) allocating time for one issue versus another, (3) allowing enough time for processing difficult concepts, (4) responding honestly to difficult questions, and (5) making use of unexpected contributions from participants.

5. *Structure.* I cannot be flexible unless I'm also highly structured. In fact, I'd argue that it's the structure (first) that allows me to be (or seem) flexible (second). Many process-oriented teachers would agree with me—that internal structure begets external formats in which freedom, exploration, and discovery are then possible (and even likely).

To lead workshops well, I need to be in control of (1) what is happening, (2) how well it is happening, and (3) where it is going. And I need to be in control even when it *seems* that I am not, for if I really am in control, I've planned for loose moments that *appear* out of control. Whenever a digression occurs (frequently) or unexpected questions arise (fewer as I gain experience), I'm always calculating how it may fit into my overall scheme, how much time to spend on it, where that time will come from, and how to condense something later on yet keep my agenda intact. Which means that while I'm listening, responding, laughing, whatever, I'm also watching the clock and looking for a transition to where I need to go next—when I'm good this doesn't show, when I'm not, it does.

## Designing Workshops

In designing individual workshop sessions within day-long workshops, the first questions I ask myself are writers' questions: Who is my audience? What do they need to know? And how can I help them discover it? My next question is a teacher's question: How much time do I have? What follows is systematic condensation of what I've learned about the main business of the workshop (Fulwiler, "How Well").

1. *Curriculum.* I design whole workshops of a day or more to move from cognitive concerns to rhetorical ones (Fulwiler, "Showing"). In other words, I like to spend the first day on matters related to "writing-to-learn," as that strikes participants as the newest idea, hits them closest to home (their own experience), and makes potentially the greatest difference. The second day, I introduce ideas associated with "learning to write," which are actually the concerns that caused most participants to attend the workshop in the first place—the problems they see in their own writing as well as the problems in finished drafts of student writing. The most profound effect occurs, of course, when participants see the relationship between the two days—which becomes the focus of workshops lasting longer than two days.

2. *Collaboration.* The generation of knowledge in workshops is collaborative. No matter how much I guide each workshop in one direction or another, I am always prepared for syntheses and conclusions to differ a little bit from one group of participants to the next. In designing individual exercises within one or two day workshops I rely heavily on small groups to generate ideas, keep individuals engaged and active, and keep the whole workshop moving rapidly.

If I divide a large group (25) into smaller groups (5 groups of 5 each), I will never know exactly what each group does or discusses. However I trust that a discussion among interested, committed teachers and professors who have joined the workshop voluntarily will be fruitful no matter what they talk about or how they go about it. (Participant comments confirm this trust.) As leader (direction giver) I always start small groups in a particular direction, providing both focus and task.

3. *Focus and Task.* Educators—like students—work best when they know what they're doing, why, and for how long. When I divide a large group into smaller groups, I specify the task I want them to do, write my directions on a transparency, provide a time limit (always less rather than more), and ask that someone in the group report out to the larger group. Sometimes I provide a transparency to each group so they can visually project their ideas.

4. *Size, Time, and Composition.* For large issues on which I hope for a rich diversity of opinion, I use larger groups (4–6) and provide more time (10–20 minutes). For smaller issues I use smaller groups (3) and give less time (5–10 minutes). And sometimes I simply want quick sharing with a neighbor, in which case I allow only a couple of minutes. When I am working fast with short tasks, I ask people to meet together where they happen to be sitting. When I give larger or longer tasks and want to ensure a new mix of opinion (interdisciplinary or random), I count people off (by the total number of groups desired). Sometimes I group people according to common interest (all teachers of science or large classes of seniors), in which case I also give them more rather than less time.

5. *Consensus.* I never trust an individual response; I always trust a group. When I pose questions or problems at a workshop ("What are some guidelines to keep in mind when responding to student papers?"), I have learned that an individual can give an inappropriate (to the business of the workshop) response that will set the workshop back rather than move it forward ("Lower the paper one grade for each misspelling"). I have also learned a small group, after discussing the question briefly, will always yield a constructive response ("Say something positive to each writer").

6. *Rhythms.* More often than not, I find myself designing into my exercises the following pattern: private writing in response to a posed question; small group talk about what people have written or are thinking, maybe reaching a consensus; then reports out to the larger group with me bringing everyone to central focus by recording the reported ideas (with minimal editorial on my part) on the overhead projector. Private writing, small group talk, large group focus. This allows for both personal ideas—deviant and otherwise—and some element of social consensus. In working within this structure, I find myself making frequent supportive comments on participant comments; in rare instances, I will make challenging comments when I think the conclusions destructive in some ways—always a judgment call. (I see myself generally as a facilitator, but sometimes as an expert.)

7. *Modules.* I'm always thinking in units to which I can add or subtract while keeping the presentation or discussion essentially intact. Consequently, I plan activities in movable blocks of time. (If I have 60 minutes I might sketch out 5 minutes for directions; 10 minutes to write; 25 minutes to share; 10 minutes to process the exercise; 5 minutes for private written reflection; 5 minutes lost to questions, shuffling, and the like). If something goes wrong (a late start, questions, whatever) I will cut where I need to, usually in the middle, never at the moment where I most expect insight. I never want to cut short the time needed to process and own an idea and make it one's own. In the example above: Do I shorten the writing time? The sharing time? Eliminate the private reflection? I could do any of them, but I would be sure to hold onto the whole 10 minutes to process the exercise.

8. *Open Exercises.* For some exercises I ask genuinely open questions, ones to which there are no right answers. I always start workshops this way and provide opportunities along the way for these sessions. I usually begin open sessions with some private writing and trust it to lead to a fruitful all-group discussion: Open exercises may begin with open questions: (1) What questions do you have? (2) What insights have you developed this morning? (3) What are some guidelines for making good writing assignments? or (4) Develop one assignment using informal writing for one of your classes.

These questions lead to open-ended discussions in which the participants are the primary knowledge builders. My main concern with these sets is in ending them well (conclusively and on time). During the free-wheeling discussion, I commonly use the overhead projector to record their ideas. To conclude I often ask the group which of several ideas is the most important and why.

9. *Closed Exercises.* I close an exercise when I know that a certain sequence of activities will (usually) lead a group to a fairly specific set of

ideas. In these cases, I will much more rigorously limit or cut off discussion and will make sure we do get to the punch line. For example, to develop guidelines for responding to student papers, I will organize the following sequence: (1) pass out and read a sample paper; (2) make brief personal notes about strengths and weaknesses; (3) in groups of five, write a consensus response to the student (on a blank transparency); (4) project and read these responses to the group; (5) ask the other groups to role play the student receiving this comment; (6) conclude with the whole group making a list of guidelines to keep in mind when responding to student writing.

This is "closed" in the sense that one step leads to and depends upon another; however, it should also be clear that the conclusions are as likely to be "open" as those in the more open exercise. If I want to make sure the group gets a specific set of guidelines, I will add a step 7 and supplement their own conclusions by handing out my own list of "Guidelines for Responding to Student Writing." I commonly hand out such lists with "open" exercises as well. And some exercises (e.g., #5 above) will be open or closed depending on how important it is to keep the sequence exactly intact.

10. *Writing.* From Don Murray I've learned to "trust the writing." All my workshops start, continue and end with writing: informal writing written in participant journals which I seldom see; informal (expressive) writing which they generate for themselves in response to my questions, which they sometimes share with partners or a small group or me (but always with the right to pass). I use five minutes of informal writing to focus the attention of my workshop group on whatever problem or issue we are addressing: it provides time to think and catch thoughts, to focus without distractions, to record what's going on and so leave a record after the workshop is over: (1) "Describe how you revise your own writing" or (2) "What insights have you generated so far?" or (3) "Think of one possible exercise using an audience other than yourself for one course that you teach."

When participants write in response to my questions, I am always writing too. They see me writing. Sometimes I am writing a response to my own question, if it is still genuinely open for me (e.g., 1 and 3 above); other times, when the question is one to which I clearly know the answer, I write notes to myself about workshop plans. But the participants always see me writing. (I use the same technique in class with students.)

11. *Predictability.* The more workshops I do the more predictable they become. I can never predict all the questions, responses, and turns a given group will take. I am always surprised by something. But I narrow the range of unpredictability with every new group. Predictability does not lead to boredom. Quite the contrary, my workshops become better and



better to the degree that I can anticipate participant questions, concerns, and responses, for that allows me to develop considered answers and new exercises. In fact, only when workshops become predictable to some significant extents, do I become really confident about what I'm doing. Being able to predict allows me to see the commonness of concerns and the usefulness of some answers over others. In addition, the more accurately I can predict where a group will go, the better I am able to design the next exercise.

I now train myself to conduct new exercises with what scientists call "thought experiments," where I ask hypothetical questions and imagine hypothetical—yet likely—answers. Experience with real questions and answers helps me do this. The only way to develop this capacity for prediction is to repeat workshops more than once.

12. *Partners.* At home, in my own university, I always work with a partner. We take turns at the front of the group establishing our different sorts of authority. When I'm active, she's taking notes on the overhead. When I answer incompletely, she may elaborate. When I miss something, chances are she does not. And vice versa. When I do guest workshops, on the road, I ask for someone else to help me write on the overhead, allowing me to watch and work the audience with my full attention and not worry about my legibility or spelling (both less than perfect). The golden rule here: when my co-leader is running an exercise, it's her exercise—I help her, but am careful not to take it over (and I expect the same in return). Well treated, partners give better vision, new ideas, and confidence. In addition good partners make the whole enterprise a lot more fun.

## Nuts and Bolts

I want to say a little about the small stuff of workshops, the *where*, *when*, and *mechanics* that contribute to making workshops something different and special and worth paying extra attention to. Ideally, lectures and presentations imply one kind of space and time, seminars another, and workshops still another. Realistically, I take what I can get and afford, and often make do.

1. *Setting.* Good writing workshops take place away from the daily distractions of teaching, telephones, mailboxes, students, faculty, and family. I especially enjoy working with groups *off campus* in conference settings, such as those provided by hotels, resorts, and seminaries. These spaces are usually good because they are designed to be distraction free. Meeting off campus also makes people feel well treated and a bit special, making the writing workshop something other than the usual in-service

or faculty development project. Professional conference centers usually have good equipment (projectors, flip charts, etc.) which they maintain. Some of my best experiences have come from multi-day workshops where we all stayed overnight together, circumstances that allowed participants to gain dimensions both more social and more affective than day-only workshops. Overnights, of course, cost more. (At Vermont, we cannot afford to pay stipends or lodge participants overnight, but we can afford to feed them well—food my only real carrot.) The best physical space is flexible, lending itself variously to whole-group presentations (plenaries) and small-group discussion.

2. *Size and Shape.* I like best to work with groups of twenty to thirty (give or take five). With fewer than fifteen, the dynamic slows down; with more than thirty-five, you lose group cohesion.

For fifteen to twenty-five participants, I prefer chairs arranged around the outside of seminar tables set in a U shape, or chairs (with writing surfaces) arranged in a semi-circle. In both cases an overhead projector occupies the open space. With larger (thirty to fifty) I prefer tables fanned out around the projector (four to six teachers per table). With groups any larger than fifty, whole group discussion becomes limited and I simply request a wide semi-circle a few rows deep.

3. *Time.* I prefer at least an hour and a quarter of uninterrupted time for an individual workshop session. If I have that kind of time, then I can have people write, talk among themselves, and still retain time to process what they've done and make a lesson from it. Much better would be two such blocks, back to back (a whole morning or afternoon). Better still are four blocks, (a whole day). Formats of a day or less are good for the introduction of ideas, but inadequate for deeper exploration, where participants need time to express doubts, try things out, raise questions, and ponder answers. To accomplish that, I prefer a multi-day format (two days to two weeks, depending on intentions, budgets, and circumstances) where participants have a chance to sleep on the new ideas and come back to them with new questions. However, without stipends, about the longest time I have been able to sell to non-writing teachers is several days.

4. *Equipment.* Engineers taught me to use overhead projectors. Engineers in general are visual thinkers and use these machines to sketch ideas, make diagrams, solve problems, and play with dimensionality in a way that words alone cannot do. I no longer know how to do workshops without overhead projectors (and generous numbers of transparencies and marking pens). Overhead projectors allow leaders to visually reinforce and illustrate ideas on the spot, to face the group, to write smaller (therefore faster), to erase (like blackboards), to have a record preserved

for later use (like flipcharts), and to allow for overwriting on prepared material for emphasis or change. They cue my own ideas, keeping them in sequence and me on track—like lecture notes made visible to all. The lighted screen also holds participant attention and keeps the group focused. Finally, by outlining discussion notes on a transparency as we go along, we create the important feeling that we are, together, generating knowledge about teaching and writing—we can see it, change it, save it, and if we choose, publish it.

Leaders who become experienced with overheads learn that the machines themselves are sources of power: the closer I stand to a lighted overhead projector, the more attention I command; the farther away, the less. When I'm presenting information I stick close; when I'm listening, I deliberately move away to encourage people to talk to each other instead of to me (and the machine). To emphasize participant ideas, I commonly give out transparencies and ask teachers to project this or that idea to the group.

## An Instrument of Change

I am pleased when participants tell me that I "practice what I preach." More than anything else this dimension sets workshops apart from other learning experiences. People not only discuss ideas—itsself an active process—but they actually place themselves in the student role and try things out. If teachers practice ideas in the safe confines of a workshop first, they are more likely to do so in their classes later on. If I want to encourage the use of journals, I ask teachers to keep one and write in it frequently throughout the workshop. If I want to encourage the use of peer writing groups, I ask teachers to meet in such groups during the workshop. If I want to encourage assignments that allow time for revision and editing, I ask teachers to revise and edit their own writing during the workshop. In this way, participants learn what they will put up with and what they will not; what is pleasant and what painful; what is consistent with their styles, beliefs, personalities and what is not. Above all, the most important lesson taught by workshops is empathy—for young learners—a concrete awareness of the needs, frustrations, anxieties, and joys experienced by students. Workshops place faculty once again in student roles causing them to learn from the outside in and not be threatened by it.

In fact, workshops offer a number of powerful lessons to faculty in need of pedagogical rejuvenation: empathy as a student, self-awareness as a writer, classroom strategies as a teacher. This combination of workshop influences changes some—not most (it's hard to tell)—teachers absolutely. It changes the way they operate in conventional classrooms,

challenging such traditional practices as workshops call into question: fixed seating; 50-minute time periods; three meetings a week; classes of more than 30 students; rooms without overhead projectors; information dispensing; right answers; multiple-choice examinations; lock-step assignments; grades; non-collaborative projects; and illusions of objectivity.

In short, because writing workshops provide the most direct training for student-centered teaching and learning, they also provide the most useful model for long-term educational reform.

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