Playing Well with Others: Demystifying the Workshop Process

Emily R. Johnston

Workshop, or peer-review, is part of writing in many genres. We cannot escape it. It *should* be beneficial for us as writers, but more often than not, it isn't. In this article, the author describes how as writers, we fluctuate between the view that *we* suck and that *our peers* suck as writers which ultimately shuts down the productive potential of workshops. Sharing from her own experience in a creative writing workshop, the author describes how she learned to see the peer-review process differently after encountering "He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named" (the often-inevitable "jackass" in workshops) who scribbles *three* meager words of useless judgment on deeply personal poems. At first, the author wants to run for the hills and never look back at writing again. Fortunately, her professor helps her see the value of workshop which the author passes along to us, here.

This is what every author does, at least the ones I know: we workshop. We entrust to others our writing—an extension of our best and worst selves, our intelligence and dreams, our accomplishments and fears. We open ourselves up to praise but also to criticism and humiliation. Sometimes our readers are friends or family. More often, however, they're acquaintances—even strangers, like classmates or instructors; faceless editors of newspapers, magazines, and journals; admissions committees; CEOs; even local and national officials. We take a leap of faith or (when we're feeling particularly lame about our writing) of stupidity, letting the chips of our egos fall where they may. Whether writing for professors, bosses, or the "Sunday Book Review" section of the *New York Times*, none of us is spared the experience of getting feedback on our work.

For me, things tend to start relatively well. Maybe a professor gives an assignment for a class I'm in or a journal sends out a call for papers. I scramble and scribble, punch out a draft, show it off to my B.F.F. or email it to my Mom in California. They affirm my visions of earning that A+, a prestigious publication, the National Book Award or Pulitzer Prize. My faithful readers tell me my work is "awesome," "great," "revolutionary"—that it only needs a few minor corrections, if that. I am on top of the world.

The *real,* high-stakes peer-review process, however, looms on the horizon. When the writing is for a class or some other peer-reviewed venue, this means "Workshop Day"/"D-Day" (Deadline Day). With great pride, I hand over my draft to my peers/reviewers or editors. I can't wait to read their "interesting!" and "wow!" comments in the margins, impressed as they'll be with my witty insights; they'll offer suggestions for minor adjustments, but my writing, of course, is too brilliant for anything as significant as "changes" or "revisions." In classroom-writing/workshop scenarios, I read my peers' drafts in turn, becoming more assured of my own brilliance as I note their misspelled words, disorganized paragraphs, and lack of compelling evidence to support their mediocre ideas. I've really knocked this one out of the park, I congratulate myself.

But often, and more accurately, "Workshop Day"/"D-Day" knocks *me* out of the park of illusion and arrogance onto the hard streets of reality. One of two things happens that, time and again, flies in the face of all I've believed about writing and giving/receiving feedback:

(a) I discover that my peers are jackasses. I gave them paragraph after paragraph of feedback on what I deem to be unsatisfactory work. They wrote two useless sentences on my masterpiece; what a disgrace! I vow never to invest myself in writing classes again and henceforth, despise them.

(b) I discover that *I'm* the jackass when I read on my draft the copious comments from my peers/reviewers, pointing out all the errors, gaps, and confusing ideas. I hate them. I hate myself. I slink out of class or "Mark as Spam" editors' emailed comments, my disgust with writing workshops confirmed.

Either way, I wind up throwing in the towel on being a writer. I tell myself that I've experienced enough rejection; that it's time to change majors, choose a different career path, and get myself a brand new identity.

I'll share one of my writing-soul rattling experiences that happened when I went back to school for a Master of Fine Arts (MFA) in Poetry in Alaska. It all began almost a decade ago. I had applied and gotten into the graduate program in Creative Writing at the University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF): "Yes!" I felt like anything was possible. Not unlike my visions of the "perfect paper" or the "perfect workshop," I fantasized about the "perfect community of writers" in Alaska: old log-cabins for classrooms; snow gently falling and blanketing the birch trees outside; sipping spiked cocoa by crackling fires while discussing poetic greats like W. B. Yeats, Sylvia Plath, Walt Whitman. A few days after moving in, I went to the first day of the "Poetry Workshop"

fully equipped with both my insecurity and simultaneous "I'm better than y'all" attitude. For our first assignment, the professor instructed us to write several poems that were polished enough to be "critically read" by others but still new, still fresh enough to be open to suggestions. Students then would take each others' poems home and bring them back the following class period with written feedback. So I spent that entire week composing and obsessively revising a series of poems. I deleted, then added back words; created new stanzas, then reconfigured them into multiple arrangements; I started the poems where originally I'd ended them; then I flipped the stanzas back, replacing the beginnings and endings of each poem with the originals. By the time I handed my work over to the class for their feedback, I felt confident that I could keep up with this advanced group of writers. Boy, was I wrong!

Here is evidence that attests to the devastation that *was* my first "Poetry Workshop." The excerpt is my poetry, the result of hours of slaving over word choice, structure, imagery; the comments represent the feedback I got from one particular student—we'll call him "He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named." Notice the *lack* of comments.

Thank you, J.K. Rowling, for letting me appropriate your term for Voldemort in *Harry Potter!*

Excerpt from poem entitled "Unconditional"

He didn't change shirts. He didn't change
his mind. About his Dad, Grandfather.
About any man that taught them to be men.
Though he prided himself on not demanding "women's jobs" of me:
dinner, laundry—just *Love,* he'd say—*Unconditional love.*
Until I was up against the kitchen. Up against words, flying
to stop my own. The Silencer, he named himself
when he named his devil and tried to change.
For a year his face would boil, his fingers would clench,
pulling up the sleeves of his shirt. A Marlboro. A walk.
Nothing for days but silence.
And I'd try like the devil to bring the fire back.

Comment [K1]: This is a cliché

Excerpt from poem entitled "Backbone"

Around here, make noise to keep the bears away
and never hike alone.
Climbing the spine of the Continental Divide
I wade through fireweed and cedars, bursting
through red rock, with no one
with a backpack and the memory of how rage almost got me—
three a.m., three years ago.
And as I come around the bend toward Rising Wolf
a mother grizzly catches me in her gaze through the woods.

Can I tell you, this is the place I feel safe—
that this uncovering is why I came?
Can I tell you, do this, if there's anything I can ever insist?

Comment [K2]: Not believable

Figure 1: Example of (Poor) Peer Feedback

Yes, that's all he wrote.

My professor must have seen the devastation in my face during workshop, when "He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named" handed his "comments" back to me. The next day, she called me into her office. I stepped inside, hesitant, and she closed the door behind us. What she told me that afternoon has stuck with me ever since: "Emily, I saw his comments. Burn them."

My professor, in fact, thanked me for tearing up in class, as it reminded her that all too often, writers come into workshops without a clue about how to give constructive feedback. She explained that writing workshops are *not* about passing judgment. She handed me the following "Peer Workshop Response Instructions"—a draft of a document she would pass out to students in the upcoming class:

"My Professor Comes to the Rescue!"
(*my* title for this document)

"Peer Workshop Response Instructions"
(the *official* title of this document)

For each piece submitted to workshop, all students will provide feedback by way of a **500-word *minimum* response** on the following:

1) The **literal level** in the poem: descriptions of what the poem seems to be doing. Consider such questions as,
   a. Is the poem lyric or narrative (these or two genres of poetry)?
   b. Who is the speaker (the person or voice *speaking* in the poem)?
   c. What, if anything, is happening in the poem?
   d. What other elements are at work in the poem: a particular setting, time period, or style?

2) Your **personal response** to the poem: descriptions of your personal reactions to the poem. *Only after you've described what the poem is trying to do* should you move onto describing your own opinions or thoughts. Consider such questions as,
   a. How are images/word choices/poetic forms impacting this poem?
   b. What emotional/mental/physical/spiritual reactions do you have to the poem?
   c. Where are you delighted or surprised by the poem? Why?
   d. Where are you confused or turned away by the poem? Why?

Next, my professor handed me *her* feedback on my traumatized poem from the night before. In her response, I could see this constructive-feedback

philosophy at work: first, she described what she thought was going on in my poems (their "Literal Levels"), then she gave me her personal feedback on the poems (her "Personal Responses"). The excerpted text represents her feedback, while the comments represent my commentary on it. I think you'll catch my drift when you read it:

The *Professor's* Response to my Poem, "Backbone"

Excerpts from her "Literal Level" Commentary:

"This poem seems to be about an individual speaker who is backpacking through 'the Continental Divide.' The speaker seems to be grappling with some painful memory pertaining to death given lines like, "how rage almost got me—three a.m., three years ago"; "a mother grizzly catches me in her gaze"; "years against your bedroom wall"; and "throw death down with a thousand steps out onto the backbone."

Excerpts from her "Personal Response" Commentary:

"I like how the questions in the middle stanza invite me, as a reader, into the poem because they're posed directly to the reader. This move expands the entire poem from a first-person ("I") perspective into a second-person ("You") perspective, thus allowing readers to consider their own memories about death as they read your poem. But I am not sure that the questions themselves are the most effective ones to ask because it's hard to believe that anyone would feel safe hiking alone when bears are around! Can you revise the questions so that they reflect the speaker's simultaneous fear *and comfort* in this space? I think that may make the language more believable.

Comment [K1]: When the professor directly quoted lines from the poem, it told me that she had actually read my work and wasn't making up ideas out of thin air. In the process of summarizing the poem, the reader gets to make sense of it before diving into any personal commentary, and I as the writer get to see how others interpret my poem. In this case, my professor thought the poem was about death. But I was really trying to write about domestic abuse. Thanks to her summary interpretation, I knew I had to go back and write some more lines to relate death specifically to domestic abuse.

Comment [K2]: My professor had warmed me up to her criticism by summarizing my poem, first. She showed me that I could trust her to read my work carefully. Rather than the "Not believable" comment that I received from the workshop jackass, I got useful feedback on how to revise this part of the poem to make it sound more believable.

Comment [K3]: I am proud to report that the final, revised version of this poem was published in the university's student literary magazine, *Ice Box*!

Figure 2: Helpful Instructor Comments

So how can my experience in a *poetry* workshop tell you anything about workshops/peer reviews in *other* kinds of writing situations? How can we do this workshop thing well? Or if not well, at least better than we've *been* doing it? How can we see workshop as anything other than B.S. or utter terror? This is where I find thinking about genre to be especially useful. If genres are responses to recurring situations—as text messages and emails are responses to the recurring situation of communicating quickly and efficiently in our day-to-day interactions—then it seems to me that writing workshops are genres, too. We bring drafts to our community of writers (in whatever context, school or otherwise), we read each other's work, and we give and receive feedback: all responses to the recurring situation of needing to expose our work to others in order to learn how to revise so that our writing has the effects we want it to have—to become stronger writers and to encourage our peers to do the same. And like any active genre worth its salt, there are variations from workshop to workshop, project to project, class to class. Yet at the core, I've found there are several principles for fostering constructive workshops, no matter what writing situation I find myself in:

Unlike an "inscribed genre" that is written and pretty much stays the same over time, an active genre changes, morphs, and never appears the same twice because the cultures/contexts in which they're created take it up and refine, revise, even warp it to suit their purposes. Trajectory in action!

(1) **Write down my expectations**. Before I can effectively participate in workshop, I need to have a clear sense of what it is that I'm actually bringing into the space and how I want things to go. So I jot down some notes: *What am I trying to accomplish in this piece of writing? What's going well, from my perspective? What are some areas where I especially need feedback?* By writing out my expectations, I allow three things to happen:

   a. First, I can take the reins *back* from my ego which likes to remind me of my bitterness from past workshops when readers ripped my writing to shreds, or to tell me my writing is perfect and doesn't need help. Especially when writing on highly-charged topics like those in my poems from that first writers' workshop, taking this step helps me keep my emotions in check. My writing is not me; rather, it represents one form of self-expression.

   b. Second, I can hold myself accountable for 'The Golden Rule' of workshop: I respond to my peers' work as I want them to respond to mine.

   c. Being honest with myself about my expectations can help me leave negativity and blind optimism at the door, enabling me to focus on those aspects of workshop that *encourage* rather than *block* my writing. "He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named" (unfortunately, as I've learned, an inevitable kind of participant in many workshops) loses his power over me and my work.

(2) **Open my mind** to the possibility that I will learn just as much (if not more) from giving my peers feedback on their work as I will from receiving theirs on mine. So once I've identified my own expectations, it's time to dive in! It's too easy to view workshop as a mere editing session—a task to check off the to-do list. When I think that way, workshop turns into busy work. At worst, it turns into the scenario of me, crying in class just a couple of weeks into the semester. I cannot control how readers respond to my work. But I *can* control how I respond to theirs. Opening my mind simply means taking notice of where connections and *dis*connections occur between my version of the assignment and my peers' version of it. For example, in reading others' poems about difficult personal experiences, I come to understand that we *all* struggle to write clearly about these kinds of topics, but that there's no reason not to keep trying.

(3) **Read like a writer, not like a judge.** This is my *favorite* principle—the one that makes all the others successful. This is the one my first poetry-workshop professor taught me that fateful day in her office. By

reading like a writer, all I have to do is put myself in the writer's shoes to try and understand what genre/genres are being used, the purpose of the text, and the audience it's targeting. I don't have to judge anything as "good" or "bad"—words that aren't useful anyways as they're highly subjective and don't give the writer anything concrete to work with. Here are some things I write about in the marginalia and at the end of a peer's work:

a. What is this piece about? What's happening? What is the text trying to accomplish? How can I tell? Am I confused about these things at any point? Why?

b. To what degree is the text working within the features of the chosen genre(s)? Is the text "bending the rules" in any way and if so, what impact does that have?

c. To what degree does the text convey its purpose and target its specific audience? How can I tell?

In articulating these things, I can help my peers write and revise in ways that help them reach *their* goals, not mine. After all, who am I to say what "good writing" is? This strategy helps create that community-learning spirit in which I can learn just as much from reading *your* work as you can from reading *mine.* I don't have to be "right" or "wrong;" nor do I have to be responsible for how "successful" your work is in terms of grades, publications, and so forth. Best of all, I avoid making enemies based upon whether or not I "like" someone's writing.

Even as I write this article, I am keenly aware of the fact that you may think it is crap. Or maybe (though doubtful) you think it's the best thing you've read in years. Neither judgment is useful to me as the author *or* to you, my dear reader. Why not? Because both perspectives are cop-outs. Let me explain:

• **Outright rejection** tells me nothing specific about what I stink at doing and thus, what I need to pay attention to when I sit down to revise or to write my next piece. This also means that you, the reader, have learned little to nothing about what makes a piece of writing fall flat. So how will you know when *you're* putting your readers to sleep?

• **Generic praise** tells me nothing specific about what I am doing "well" and thus, what I should continue doing in my writing. This also means that you, the reader, have learned little to nothing about what makes a piece of writing grab your attention and make you want to keep reading. So how will you know whether or not you're compelling in your *own* writing?

* * *

Last I heard, He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named had dropped out of our MFA program and was working as a campus-shuttle driver for the university. His girlfriend had gone traveling abroad, leaving him to live in a run-down cabin on the busiest, noisiest street in Fairbanks, AK. I rest my case: playing well with others really *does* pay off.