Roundtable 1

Finding Room for Computers in the Poetry Workshop

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Last spring, I had my first opportunity to teach a poetry workshop. Teaching at a community college, there are limited offerings for creative writing, so needless to say I was excited. I thought back to the roundtable discussions that took place during my own undergraduate creative writing workshop experiences: a group of fledgling writers circled up, talking through new work, learning the ropes to write poetry. On the first day teaching my workshop, I arrived at our assigned classroom to find it was a computer lab. It had no common tables or space to pull chairs away from the terminals, all of which were arranged in rows along two long tables. The room was designed to seat thirty, and we were a group of seven, counting myself. On the first day, students dispersed throughout the room and the two tables, booting up the computers, essentially out of sight from one another. I had hoped for an atmosphere like the ones I experienced in my own undergraduate workshops, where students and the instructor circled up at desks or sat together at a table, ready to talk through poems.

My goals in teaching the class were to get students to feel a sense of community with one another so workshops would be as effective as possible. I was also hoping to have students spend time generating new work through various writing exercises. I wanted to reinforce that writing can occur in more than one medium, with time spent on the physical page as well as the

digital. It was safe to assume students were using computers at home or on campus otherwise, so I had planned a kind of "get back to paper" campaign. It now seemed odd to go with that tack, given that it would ignore the chief purpose of the room and its resources.

I was not interested in having students work on paper because of some anti-computer sentiment. I hoped that working on paper, in the rough so to speak, would assuage some of the anxieties I see students new to workshop experience. Working on paper would mean things had to go awry here and there, that lines would need scratched out, written over, etc. Seeing that rough stuff, I hoped, would give everyone a break from the nerves that can come with sharing creative work with others.

I wanted students to work out generative exercises together, swapping pieces of paper back and forth, in a way similar to what students would for an "exquisite corpse," where participants each write one sentence or line, fold the paper under so that line cannot be seen by next contributor, and continue this until the piece of paper is filled. At that time, it is unfolded and read as one continuous creative work. A generative exercise is essentially prewriting work, such as a free write, where there is a goal to generate raw material that may be put to use.

That first day, I realized I would need to adapt the generative exercises I was hoping to employ to rely on computers. This experience became a chance to find new methods for students to collaborate, to show them that writers are not always working in isolation. The collaborative element also gave students a means to be the center of discussion and to explain their ideas and choices for creative work to each other. These exercises may also help address some challenges that scholars cite with the workshop-model, such as students producing sufficient material for critique and understanding the goals of discussing creative work in a classroom setting.

I planned for students to complete an exercise once a week, and I worked out a system to use the computers to complete the generative exercises that includes several steps. First, students open a word processing program, and everyone sets the font and spacing to the same style. After doing so, students turn off the monitors so they are not able to revise sentence-level errors or make revisions. I start a timer, so that each student works for two minutes at their starting terminal, and then moves on to the next computer, where he or she has another two minutes to generate work. This process goes on for 12-15 minutes, during which I generally give students encouragement consisting of phrases like "don't think, write" and "if the line isn't working, skip it." I did my best to ensure students that the exercise was more about producing content than meeting their own expectations or the imagined expectations of the group.

Once time is up, students return to their original computers, read through the results, and then begin revising. The exercises usually consist of directions to generate individual lines of poetry, without concern for theme or end product. I would put a formula on the white board, something like "write three metaphors, a declarative phrase, repeat" or "write two images, address the reader with a question, answer it using a simile." Revising these mish-mashes of lines would usually take 15 minutes, with the directive to cut the work down to 15 or 20 lines that affect some coherent emotion or idea. I encouraged students during revision to splice lines together, change line order, cut what did not fit, and make additions as they felt necessary. I stressed each time that these exercises were not serious, and if the only thing that came from the finished product was a few disparate images, so be it.

It was often the case that students did see results beyond chunks of random lines, often crafting something that other students could appreciate and see as a collaborative effort. In

"Transforming the Group Paper with Collaborative Online Learning," Peter Kittle and Troy Hicks provide categories of collaborative writing from Tori Haring-Smith's *Writing Together: Collaborative Learning in the Writing Classroom*. Before going forward, I will note here that while my course was not online, the focus on writing and collaborating in a digital medium seems very similar. To continue, these generative exercises are best described as "co-authored writing," where "all authors have a stake in what is said. There is often one facilitator who coordinates the final draft of the text, but everyone is expected to contribute" (528). When these exercises were most successful, students were moving beyond the limited template I provided, revising their own work and work of their peers to create a piece of writing from group effort.

It is very important to the collaborative spirit that students cut and revise one another's work during the process. This allows students to move beyond the template I provided for generating lines, giving the work the capacity to be "real" instead of something made from a recipe. This also means students, as Knobel and Lankshear explain, see "rules and procedures are flexible and open to change'" (qtd. in Kittle and Hicks 527). Kittle and Hicks recognize this as a challenge for students writing in digital environments, where the question becomes "to what extent do [students] feel right about adding or subtracting from it?" (527).

In my experience, students did not challenge one another's choices, but there was some push and pull over who owned the final product. What if a student decided that lines from the exercise should belong only to him or her? I encouraged students to see this work as purely experimental, to see the final product of each exercise as a foundation for possible continued collaboration and co-authorship. During the term, no lasting collaborations formed between the students that I am aware of, but it did become less of a concern with repetition. As these

collaborations piled up, and new poems were produced from the exercises every week, students seemed more willing to accept credit as co-authors, rather than requiring their individual work be removed or returned to them.

Kittle and Hicks also touch on ownership and collaborative writing projects, explaining that "everyone retains responsibility for his/her own contributions, but the synergy of the group produces a new text that no one could have produced alone" (527). Students seeing their own lines mixed together and put to use in new ways again and again seems to reinforce the notion that the product of the exercise is ultimately about the group's contributions instead of any one person's material.

I feel students developed respect for one another's choices. This respect seems essential to a workshop course, and it also resonates with Kenneth A. Bruffee's ideas where he explains that collaboration "provides a particular kind of social context for conversation, a particular kind of community—a community of status equals—peers" ("Collaborative Learning" 642). A conversation where students are at the center—discussing with each other their choices in writing—seems like an ideal way to reinforce values that are needed for the in-depth critiques that took place for students' individual work.

These students are brand new to the discipline and come to the classroom for different reasons. Certainly some of the students were there because they have always wanted to write poetry, though the group also had students who wanted to improve their capability to write lyrics as songwriters, and of course students who simply thought that poetry sounded like something fun to try. This range of interests and motivations can make it hard for students to coherently discuss one another's work and generate critique. The generative exercises allowed students a

great deal of time for talking through what they think of poetry, without the added pressure that comes in presenting a "workshop ready" poem.

Along with allowing students to converse as peers and have a common objective in the exercises, this process might be a means of entering into "abnormal discourse," which Bruffee explains occurs when "consensus no longer exists with regard to rules, assumptions, goals, values, or mores" (648). It is safe to say these students entered the course without any consensus or "normal" discourse for the workshop environment. Bruffee relies here on Richard Rorty for an explanation of the capacity of abnormal discourse to create knowledge, and he also stresses that while abnormal discourse is the means by which knowledge is created, it cannot be taught as a method or practice (648). The abnormal springs from conversation among peers who are working to define what they know. Students are able to talk through why some exercises created interesting results where others did not, assess individual lines for evocative language or interesting turns of phrase, and hopefully understand poetry and drafting processes more clearly as a result.

The format of these exercises is very similar to other prewriting strategies, like timed freewrites, "exquisite corpse" exercises, and erasure exercises (cutting language from an existing text to create a new one). The results I observed in these students were purely anecdotal, but I would like to try and situate these practices in the general workshop model for creative writing pedagogy. Hal Blythe and Charlie Sweet make a review of different models for creative writing classes in "The Writing Community: A New Model for the Creative Writing Classroom."

Their discussion of models highlights the workshop model as the most commonly practiced, and my classroom model fits with it very closely. Blythe and Sweet explain the

essential format as "a test market for beginning writers" (313) and go on to provide Stephen

Minot's explanation of the model as "'a doorway for you to get criticism and motivation for you

to write because of the deadlines that are imposed'" (314). Blythe and Sweet also relate some of

the common pitfalls of the workshop model, such as students "poisoning" the atmosphere of the

group after feeling rejected by peers, as well as challenges that arise because of disparities in

students' skills with writing and ability to produce work on the same schedule (314). It is my

opinion that a focus on generative exercises might work to mitigate some of these concerns.

Blythe and Sweet see it as possible that students may come to the workshop looking for

"personal therapy," and generally describe the atmosphere as one that can be easily tainted by a

student who does not feel accepted (314). I would not argue that using generative exercises is

going to directly mitigate these reactions on the part of students, but the exercises may help as a

means of getting students to move beyond seeing the class as a sounding board for their identity.

Being asked to write under the constraints of the generative exercises could help students to

disassociate from the product. The exercise material is partly his or hers, partly the group's, and

it no longer acts as a manifestation of personality or identity.

There is also the concern that students sometimes are not able to keep to schedule in a

workshop environment, leaving Blythe and Sweet to ask "what happens when everyone circles

up and there is no work to discuss?" (314). My experience as a student and instructor in the

workshop model has never resulted in this scenario—with everyone arriving empty-handed. I

have certainly had students express concern over the pace they need to work at though, and

students do sometimes have trouble getting a poem to feel acceptable for group critique and

discussion. I began advising students to use the leftovers of the generative exercises as a starting place for new poems.

In my experience, students new to creative writing sometimes feel that "good" writing is a result of inspiration, a flash of genius or insight. This belief undermines the importance of process writing—if the "good stuff" is entirely a matter of chance, why draft the same lines over and over? The generative exercises students used throughout this term demonstrated that writing is a result of drafting—that interesting work can come from pure exercise. These exercises also act as a solid foundation for students to build poems from, potentially alleviating the concern Blythe and Sweet discuss about students being unable to keep up with a workshop schedule.

Ultimately, I found that using a digital platform for generative exercises allowed for an interesting approach, and one that benefitted students by stressing the importance of process, discussion, and collaboration. These exercises also helped to navigate around some of the challenges that students may confront when participating in a creative writing course that follows the workshop model. It seems worth mentioning too that these exercises were fun. Once students were able to loosen up and just create lines, all sorts of unintended and interesting work was produced. That spirit of risk-taking and their willingness to speak about the creative process carried over into our workshops too, making my first workshop experience a very satisfying one.

Works Cited

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