

Does the Workshop Work? (Or How Much Work Could a Workshop Work if a Workshop Workshopped Work?)

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I suppose I should begin with something of a confession. Although I am a professional writer and author of ten novels and about eight hundred other publications, and although I've been teaching creative writing workshops on both the undergraduate and graduate level for more than twenty years in what would be construed as at least highly respectable programs, and although I am more or less officially designated as the senior creative writing professor in my university, I have no idea what a proper workshop is or how to teach it, let alone how one should work.

I should also admit that I never took but one course in creative writing. The course I did take was back in 1967. It was taught by Eugene McKinney, a playwright of some note back around the middle of the twentieth century. I was a freshman drama major at the time; the course was required.

Mr. McKinney's class met in a rehearsal hall of the university theater. There were about eight students enrolled, as I recall, including a young woman in whom I had a profound romantic interest and who utterly ignored me for the entire semester. We sat in folding chairs — no desks — in a semicircle; Mr. McKinney sat in the center, smoking a pipe, and regaling us with anecdotes from his life in the professional theater: stories about famous actors and actresses, of disastrous opening nights and horrendous critical reactions. He was a very charming man, endearing, really; but he had no idea how to teach a class.

As I remember, we never discussed character, plot, dialogue, or any of the other elements of playwriting. We also didn't read any plays or talk about dramatic structure, format, or organization. Terms I would later learn, such as "plot point," "protagonist," "foil," even "act," and "scene" among hundreds of others, were never mentioned except in passing and with the assumption that we all already understood them. If we wrote and handed in a play — or anything else — I don't remember it. About all I do recall is wondering how a man of his obvious distinction could not manage to purchase trousers with inseams long enough to meet the tops of his socks. That, seriously, is about all I recall about the course. I didn't mind. I was bent on being an actor, at the time. Actors have small use for writers.

Some time later and following a transfer and a change of major, with the encouragement of a professor in a literature class, I submitted a manuscript of fiction to the creative writing professor at the University of Texas. I don't recall his name, but aspiring student-writers had to offer work in advance to see if they were in some way "worthy" of enrolling in his course. My work was not so deemed, and I was barred from the class. But I hold no grudge against the professor. His discouragement directed me toward a more traditional academic path and to establish myself as a literary critic and teacher before I returned to fiction as a tenuous ambition some twenty years later. Not incidentally, those same pages, more or less without revision, became the first three chapters of my first published novel.

In sum, what success I've had, modest though it's been, did not grow out of any learning, encouragement, or inspiration I might have gotten from a creative writing professor or formal workshop. On the contrary, after my first two brushes with creative writing, I came to hold the whole notion of such classes and the people who took them in mild contempt. To me, they fostered notions of narcissistic delusion and egocentric dilettantism and were principally a way

of avoiding the labors of scholarly writing. Obviously, I've changed my mind about that, but I still would credit the courses I took in literature, philosophy, history, and other academic fields, even science and math, as having had more value to my writing life.

It's ironic that today, the majority of my teaching load and academic responsibilities center on creative writing and workshops. But it *is* ironic, *not* hypocritical (or opportunistic), because over the years I have come to appreciate the value of the workshop and the learning opportunities it offers both instructor and student as a viable way of approaching literature and writing English in general. If, in addition, a workshop encourages a student to become a creative writer in his or her own right, so much the better. But that doesn't automatically mean that it "works."

There's danger lurking in the background of most workshops. As I survey writing programs across the country, I become suspicious of their pedagogic integrity, and I'm even more suspicious when they are cobbled together to form the basis for a college degree, particularly a higher degree, such as an MFA, in creative writing. Part of the trouble, I think, lies in the nature of the activity of creative writing itself. It doesn't really fit the academic mold. It should be, in some way, accountable for itself, but I'm not sure how. I only know that it's too different to be easily defined.

That is, in a way, the core irony, since it is the business of literary scholars to study and illuminate the value and meaning behind what is, in all instances, creative writing. But there's a reverse maxim at work: Those who *do*, many literature professors will aver, probably should *not* teach. Or at least, they probably shouldn't teach what they do. The reasoning behind this attitude may lie in the lack of standardization of the creative writing course.

In a literature course, either lecture or seminar, one may anticipate that there is a kind of uniformity that responds to traditional university experience and offers variations on a common theme. Reading matter of one sort or another is assigned, then in some form or other, explicated, parsed, interpreted. Lecture or discussion usually ensues, and the level of the student's apprehension and retention of the material read and interpretations suggested or elicited is assessed either through examination or essay. Whereas lazier instructors often rely on short-answer quizzes and objective tests, and more industrious if not punctilious pedagogues insist on the full-blown paper, replete with documented secondary citations.

But creative writing doesn't conform to any particular norm. Some workshops work as regular courses, with thick reading lists and imaginatively evolved assignments in response; some operate as extended critique sessions, wherein the entire focus is on students' original work; criticism, rewriting, and revision are emphasized. Others take more individualized approaches. And some are exercises in instructional megalomania: professorial tirades, the trashing of student work and humiliation of the students themselves for their (perceived) inadequacies. Enrollments can vary from a handful of prequalified student writers who have submitted samples in advance as a condition for admission, to an open class where anyone who ever had any ambition whatsoever to pen a poem or story can find a chair. The only real prerequisite for many workshops is fundamental literacy, which, alas, more students lack than don't; even a nodding familiarity with genre forms isn't particularly required.

Some workshops cover only one genre; others cover all the major literary forms. In some, the goal is to produce a publishable manuscript of original work; in others, merely getting through

the semester without failing to turn in *something* is sufficient for a passing, even an excellent, mark. For the most part, though, there's no gatekeeping, no benchmark, no universal standard. Instructors largely make it up as they go along through a process of trial and error. If students don't complain, they regard their efforts as successful; if any students actually publish something, they nominate themselves for teaching awards.

Many of the articles and essays I read about creative writing workshops concern themselves primarily with the question of poetry — "Where will the next Walt Whitman come from?" one asks, if not from the workshop. It's a good question, but it seems to ignore the point that most creative writing programs are by no means restricted to a focus on the writing of verse. Active and viable programs certainly exist that concentrate on fiction, as well as screenwriting and playwriting.

In one sense, poetry is a Johnny-come-lately to the workshop process, since the earliest collegiate courses in creative writing were devoted to playwriting; in the thirties and forties, the emphasis tended to be more on prose fiction; and, today, probably the most sensationally publicized emphasize screenwriting. Universities such as Iowa, Columbia, Southern California, North Carolina, Arkansas, Duke, Penn, Yale, and others have all followed the lead of the first actual creative writing course offered at Harvard: "47 Workshop," created by George Pierce Baker.

Professor Baker's workshop was nothing less than the prototype for the field. Over time, such luminaries of American letters as Eugene O'Neill, Edward Sheldon, Sidney Howard, Maxwell Anderson, and Maruine Dallas Watkins would pass under his tutelage. But Harvard steadfastly refused to offer a degree in playwriting or any creative writing. (It still doesn't, although as many as twelve workshops a term are presently offered, and there is a writing program.) In many ways, Harvard is the exception. A mere glance at the [Associated Writing Programs](#) will confirm that the United States has no shortage of institutions of higher learning offering creative writing degrees on the bachelor's and graduate level; more than three hundred are members of the AWP. MFAs are certainly proliferating — I counted more than twenty ads for such programs in one recent publication — although they vary widely in structure. Some range from ninety-hour intensive academic ordeals all the way down to thirty-hour walk-throughs. And, of course, there are the "plug and play" degrees offered online by the "for profit" colleges that are, also, proliferating.

Some of these programs, though, are high profile and lavishly funded; they feature well-known, well-established writers with revered reputations; others are intricately organized workshop structures staffed by more or less unheralded but decently published authors; still others offer an disorganized hodgepodge of creative writing courses, often taught by faculty who themselves have no creative publications to their credit at all. And finally, there are those who are usually taught by men and women who in the past may have actually written a book and who maybe at one point enjoyed some favorable reputation, but whose principal purpose is to drop names and tell tall tales about their own checkered backgrounds.

Of course quality instruction in a graduate or undergraduate workshop has less to do with the notoriety of the instructor than with the instructor's ability to . . . instruct. Some are better at it than others, of course; some are truly excellent; and some are just horrible. University administrations are typically more interested in image than in substance; a famous name associated with a workshop raises national profile. But in most cases, the famous writers themselves are seldom motivated out of an intense desire to bring the wisdom of the art and craft

of writing to novice scribblers; often, their impulses are more pedestrian. I know of one Pulitzer Prize winner who responded to my question of how he could endure a one-way, two-hour commute to run an undergraduate workshop once a week at an exclusive but not particularly distinguished university with a deep sigh and three words: "Alimony, alimony, and alimony." Reportedly, though, his class was quite worthwhile.

What students actually learn from any of these courses is difficult to say. In spite of quantified measurements imposed on higher education by accreditation agencies and similar bureaus that are consulted on such matters, the measure of any student's learning cannot be counted or weighed; it must be proved in practice. And when the course in question is a workshop and the degree is a creative writing degree, that evaluation may be years in coming. It may not come at all, not in any tangible sense.

Not all the degrees offered by universities are officially called creative writing degrees, by any means; many — indeed most — are standard BAs or MAs or PhDs. But the penultimate project, instead of an honors or capstone paper, scholarly thesis or dissertation, is original creative work — a play, screenplay, collection of short stories or poems, even work that might be amorously defined as "creative nonfiction," which in the times of Thoreau, Mencken, and others was called, simply, "essay." How many such programs exist is also hard to say, precisely, since not all subscribe to the AWP; changes in administration, departmental philosophy, faculty, and curriculum often dictate an ebb and flow of such possibilities among schools that do not offer designated degrees in creative writing.

What all these programs have in common, though, is that each claims that the offered degree has academic integrity, although the student may have taken the majority of his courses in workshops, rather than in formally structured academic classes; advertisements in the AWP *Chronicle* and other venues such as *Poets and Writers Magazine* list among their former students a bevy of successful graduates' names, implying that these owe their success to having matriculated at this particular campus, gone through this particular program; in many cases, though, the individuals were only there for a semester or two and possibly took no creative writing at all, at least not from the present faculty.

Even the most well-publicized and rigorous programs with the highest academic reputations are probably not responsible for much successfully published work, not when the number of successful writers coming from them is compared to the total enrollment they've enjoyed over the years. In some cases, no one from the school has ever experienced more than modest and often temporary notoriety from anything published; I'll hazard that there are at least some schools that have yet to produce a graduate who has published more than a self-funded chapbook, if that.

I know a good number of writers, poets, and dramatists who hold graduate level creative writing degrees. I can say with confidence that there are highly talented and well-published people in this group, but there is an equal or larger number who are in no danger of publishing anything, ever. Among those who have, I don't think that their possession of a degree or taking a number of writing workshops had anything to do with it. Regardless, almost none of them is deriving a living solely from publishing creative work. Most of them, in fact, are teaching, just as I am. And what do we teach most often? Creative writing workshops, of course.

This is particularly true of the poets. I am sure that there are some poets in the United States who make their living solely from the professional publication of their verse. There must be some since so many students want to take poetry workshops. But one wonders what they think lies in store for them once they complete the classes or take degrees in penning poesy. At last glance, there weren't a lot of openings for poets in the local paper's classified section or on monster.com; even the major professional academic job lists offer only a comparative handful of openings asking for poetry writing as a specialty. A casual visit to any bookstore reveals a sparse number of volumes of newly published verse; outside of trade magazines and literary journals, poetry is almost never reviewed. The general reading public remains happily ignorant of most of it and casually indifferent to the rest. Unless one has an independently sufficient income or some vocational sinecure, is there much of anyone apart from greeting card writers, song lyricists, and advertising copywriters who actually devote their professional lives to composing in rhyme and meter — or, in the case of most contemporary verse, without it? Is this the career ambition of the students in a poetry workshop? It may be that these students hope to be the "next Walt Whitman"; but is it proper for us, as educators, to encourage that hope, to provide a certificate of degree in it?

Walt Whitman, is it well to recall, had no formal education in the writing of verse; neither did Emily Dickinson, Ezra Pound, or . . . well, that's sort of the point. And it may well be that the "next Walt Whitman" has already been published and faded off into obscurity for want of attention.

The grim truth, though, is that poetry workshops (as well as most other creative writing workshops) exist in the university curriculum because they are a cinch to fill with students eager to plunk down tuition dollars to take them. What happens after the door closes and the drop date is passed is of small consequence to the overall curricular integrity of the school. In the wide world of professional sports, the "concept goal" is called "butts in seats," and it doesn't take an MBA to figure that out. In the final analysis, the only difference between a seat behind home plate and one around a workshop table is price.

Obviously, I think that what makes a writer a writer is publication by a legitimate entity that, if it doesn't pony up some cash by way of royalty, at least is willing to underwrite the printing of a book or story or poem or play or essay or even film. Publication is no guarantee of success either. But it's a good start, a validation, and it provides at least an opportunity for success. But writers generally aren't published because they have an A+ in a writing workshop or in several dozen workshops; nor are they published because they have a piece of paper declaring that they are writers signed by the administrative head of some university who has never read the graduate's work.

The message I give my students is this: If you are a writer, if you have the talent, vision, perseverance, dedication, and whatever else it may take to be a writer, then you are a writer. No workshop, no degree or certificate given by any institution is going to make you more of a writer than you are, and none will provide you with sufficient bona fides to persuade a publisher — or the reading public — to buy and accept your work on any other criterion than the quality of your writing. If that happens, it will require uncommon luck and all of your other qualities combined uniquely; it may also require that you know how to use a semicolon correctly and can make subjects and verbs agree, or that you know (in dialectal dialogue, for example) when not to. Even then, if you are typical, you most likely will fail to achieve much fame and fortune as a writer.

You'll be fortunate, indeed, if anyone outside your immediate circle of family and friends knows you've published anything at all. After a few admiring platitudes uttered while fondling your new volume, even they are apt to forget about it almost instantly and wonder what useful and productive enterprise will ultimately occupy your life.

After looking over a variety of creative writing programs offered nationwide, it struck me that the whole process informing such degrees is something of an educational oddity. Degrees, particularly MFAs, in certain of the fine arts — theater arts, music, visual arts, and so on — make some kind of sense. In many of these areas, a PhD is unnecessary to certify an individual as someone who is a qualified and experienced practitioner of the art and is, therefore, worthy to teach it, at least. But when writing is concerned, more is required. And, to extend the comparison, people who hold, say, an MFA in music don't go immediately banging on the door to Carnegie Hall or even the local opera house, demanding to headline the next weekend; people with degrees in acting are not shoe-ins for Broadway or motion picture roles or even a speaking part in a community theater production, and people who paint or sculpt or take photographs aren't given top billing at major art galleries merely on the basis of their collegiate certification. A degree in screenwriting from Columbia or USC can't hurt, but what percentage of produced movies are made from graduates' scripts? I'm not sure, but I don't think there are many, and I doubt whether the writer's sheepskin had much to do with the producer's decision to make the movie.

Again, we must remind ourselves that some of the most sensational motion pictures have been written by people who never went to college at all.

Writers in pursuit of the creative writing degree have somehow gotten the idea that once the diploma is in hand, they now are qualified not only to be published but also to be widely read. Where this notion comes from is a mystery, especially since, in the main, creative writing students don't buy — or read — that much contemporary writing.

The problem here runs deep when such comparisons are more closely examined on the graduate level. Most English Departments (even some at community colleges) are reluctant to hire a new faculty member in creative writing unless that individual has published credentials in at least one genre. As accreditation standards tighten, even applicants with terminal degrees in the field often are looked at askance unless they are also published. Without the support of a book or large body of published shorter work, the creative writing diploma suddenly becomes a hollow achievement, almost comparable to an honorary degree, a kind of certificate of completion such as is handed out by YMCAs and like institutions for perfect attendance at summer camp.

Thus, I advise my students to think long and hard about taking a creative writing degree of any sort. If they publish their work, I tell them, then it's quite likely that they will be able to pursue their writing careers with no other impediment than that which faces any writer seeking success. At the very least, they'll have something to put on a resume. If they do not publish, I tell them, then they will have a degree certifying that they are qualified to do something they clearly cannot do, or at least have not yet done, and no one will take them seriously. If, however, they have a degree in seventeenth-century poetry, African history, Asian political science, or even business administration, they probably can find work teaching something, even if it's merely a remedial writing course.

A musician, an actor, an artist can display his or her wares through various public venues without large financial backing or even much trouble. They can audition, display, and even ply their trade

at private parties and on street corners. Sooner or later, these individuals, whether they are degreed or not, obtain a pretty fair assessment of the appeal of their talent and their art; they are then free to pursue it or abandon it. They also are able to use its display as evidence that they can, at least, do it, an attractive feature when one is seeking a teaching job.

But writers are different. They can't very well thrust sheaves of unpublished and oft-rejected manuscript pages, however well workshopped, under the noses of the general public or some hapless hiring committee that may well look at all original literary endeavor as nothing more than self-gratification. They can participate in public readings, of course, but the only people who are likely to attend readings — especially poetry readings — are other writers — and their long suffering friends and family — at least some of whom are hopeful of seizing the stage and reading their own unpublished work before everyone drifts off to the bar. As a famous poet of my acquaintance put it, "Unpublished writing is like a gravy stain on your shirt. Everyone's revolted by it, and everyone's too polite to tell you that it makes you look like a slob." That may be too strong, but it may also be right on the money.

Whereas it does not take a degree or even a single course to publish, it does, take a degree or significant body of published work to teach, certainly to earn tenure. And for many, many writers, teaching is the handiest way to make their monthly rent. This raises another irony. As a colleague of mine put it, "I'm not sure why I'm teaching creative writing. I've been trying to get another novel contract for years, and here I am, encouraging competition." He's got a point. Publishing houses large and small from coast to coast are already inundated by manuscripts, many tapped out by desperate teachers of creative writing, many of whom have creative writing degrees in hand; where is the logic in creating more of the same?

The answer, of course, is that the work of the workshop truly has nothing to do with creating writing. It has to do with *understanding* writing. This, by circuitous route, brings me to my point.

I think education is the key to good writing, and no writer can have too much of it. It should, actually, be a continuing, life-consuming process that goes on in parallel with the writing effort. If an education is in matters literary, so much the better; and if a workshop is properly designed, it contributes to a literary education. Great writers have come from backgrounds other than the arts and humanities. In fact, most of them have. English faculties are jam-packed with once aspiring writers who lacked the courage, the vision, the dedication, or the talent to complete and submit creative work. Many are slogging their way through another semester of freshman composition or sophomore survey. But English majors don't become writers with any more frequency than people from other fields of learning. Some have been educated in medicine, law, religion and philosophy, chemistry and physics, and psychology, even accounting and marketing; some have degrees in such diverse fields as physical education, agriculture, journalism, and police science. Some — indeed most, if one takes the historical view — have no degrees at all but are self-educated, usually well read, often interested in a multitude of topics, naturally curious, hungry to learn more all the time.

Even so, it strikes me that seeking a degree in creative writing of any sort — BA, BFA, MA, MFA, or PhD — is a sort of dumb way for a writer to approach a college education. There is enormous value in the forum of a creative writing workshop; the importance of mentoring and the comfort of being surrounded by others of common interest and career goals is matchless. It can be stimulating, focusing, supporting, even in the rarified atmosphere of constructive workshop critique. It informs, enlarges, expands, and illuminates a general education. But is it a way to a successful writing career? I think it can serve as a useful part of a well-rounded

background, but becoming an expert in something you may not be able to do in "the real world," to coin a phrase, is of questionable worth.

It's worth remembering that apart from O'Neill and Anderson, many other aspiring playwrights took Baker's "47 Workshop" and never heard a word they wrote spoken by an actor from a professional stage.

And there's this: As a professional book critic with more than three decades of experience, I notice that all too often, a book produced by a graduate of even one of the more celebrated writing workshops around the country becomes the only book that individual ever publishes. Typically, a new writer's name soars meteorically, maybe even garners some awards, then burns out and is seen no more. In some cases, this may be the result of any number of personal or business circumstances; but it happens often enough — and has been happening long enough — to justify the opinion that books published by recent workshop graduates are more committee efforts than the result of one individual, one creative mind. They have benefited by the application of many editorial suggestions, multiple revisions, and ultimately have been vetted through a peer committee devoted to making them better in each draft. Is it possible that once removed from the workshop environment, writers find themselves unable to produce such quality on their own — without constant input, reaction, suggestions for revision, and the kind of support that comes from what is often little more than mutual admiration couched in the guise of peer review?

I'm not sure. I have no statistics to support that conjecture. But I do believe that writers are writers with or without the academic certification and with or without the workshop. There are more published writers in the world than there are published workshop graduates, and that I think is a fact; there are also more successful writers who never took creative writing workshops in the world than there are successful writers who did, and I know that is a fact.

I do believe that creative writing courses, with or without the degree, can be valuable parts of the academic experience. I do believe that workshops give us better students, more perceptive readers, more sensitive critics, and may well be the best source of editorial talent and ability in the country. They also give us better writers, penpeople, if I can coin a gender-neutral term, who are a touch more sensitive to how language works, how rhetorical devices function, and how eloquence and effective discourse can be achieved.

This, then, is the answer to the question. But it's not a matter of whether workshops *work*, but rather a matter of what work they should do. In a world where traditional English majors are declining with velocity, creative writing workshops offer an indirect but viable approach to the study of literature. But to take the position, even by implication, that there is some sort of automatic connection between a workshop course and a successful publication, between a degree and a satisfying writing career is a mistake. Indeed, it's fraud to say so. I know of no course, no professor in any program, and no degree in the world that will guarantee artistic or popular success in writing or that might, by virtue of its curriculum, produce "the next Walt Whitman."