

# Teaching the “Unteachable”: Creative Writing Pedagogical Analysis

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## ABSTRACT

Finding the most effective method of creative writing pedagogy has been a nearly insurmountable task for educators within the discipline. The standard workshop model has remained the same for years—even centuries. There is a growing need for *balance* within the creative writing workshop in order for students to learn and create to the best of their abilities. The creative writing workshop must balance the power dynamics between student/professor, writer/reader, and privileged/disadvantaged students in order for this mode of instruction to remain the dominant force of creative writing pedagogy.

## INTRODUCTION

For the past three years, I have studied creative writing at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse. In my undergraduate studies, I did not begin as an English major. I changed my major seven times. During the pandemic, I decided to take Intro to Creative Writing to postpone a laboratory I dreaded taking online. At that point, I had lost two separate jobs due to time conflicts with classes I didn’t care about. For two years, I lived in my parent’s basement with no source of income and no motivation to do anything except lay down and die. After nearly two years of aimless wandering and purposelessness, Creative Writing was the only class I enjoyed.

Creative writing saved me. Instead of waking up each day and soaking in self-pity, creative writing gave me an outlet for the pent-up emotions I never had a chance to express in isolation. It gave me an avenue to express myself and motivate myself to become better and better at a time when I had lost hope of finding a purpose in education and, frankly, life.

I want others to feel the relief that I felt through creative writing. In the future, I want to show students that people care about what they think and feel—that people care about how they express themselves and the experiences that they have been through.

I want to teach others that creative writing can change their world.

Few are lucky enough to have their writing change *the* world.

But all writers can change *their* world.

I want to show them how through leading by example and prioritizing their perspectives.

Through my (admittedly) novice first-hand experience and the research conducted in the following sections, I know I can show young authors the power of creative writing and give them the tools needed to change their world.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- How does the workshop model of creative writing instruction hinder and/or facilitate the creative process of undergraduate writers?
- How does effective creative writing pedagogy balance the different power dynamics within the workshop classroom? (Author vs. Reader, Professor vs. Student, Privileged Students vs Disadvantaged Students, etc.)
- What changes (if any) must be made to the current workshop model to optimize creative writing instruction for undergraduate writers?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The pedagogy behind creative writing and finding the most effective way to teach the subject at an undergraduate level remains a significant question within the discipline. It cannot be effectively answered within its discipline—“creative writing is a complex, multifaceted endeavor that can only be adequately apprehended using an interdisciplinary perspective” (Kaufman 320). Unlike other disciplines, creative writing is unique in its reliance on *subjectivity* in evaluation. There are no objectively “correct” pieces of writing as there are correct answers in math and biology, for example—rather, the assessments in creative writing are left up to the interpretation of the instructor. However, the fields of math and biology still provide unique insight into the practice of creative writing: “The essence of mathematics is thinking creatively, not simply arriving at the right answer” (Mann 239), and creative writing may provide an opportunity for biology students to think through arguments and use higher-order thinking skills to respond to complex problems (Marzano 518).

This makes the topic of creative writing pedagogy an interesting, essentially unanswerable question that demands investigation. “While this historical position [within subjectivity] may have helped creative writing instructors to distance themselves from abstruse theoretical debates, it also ran the risk of encouraging a resistance to pedagogical reflection; the romance of the earthy, “real” kernel of activity – the production of creative work – allowed the discipline of creative writing to set itself in opposition to theory of any kind.” (Clifton 51) This historical reliance on independence based on subjective criticism and instruction has hindered the ability of creative writing pedagogy to adapt and become the best version of itself. This is a hindrance that I hope to alleviate through the balance of power dynamics within the creative writing workshop. A balance that is alluded to in some research already, “pedagogical approaches that implement both acquisition (practice based knowledge construction) and learning (theoretical analysis of the process of knowledge construction) should be the preferred approaches among creative writing faculty” (Girardi iii) but isn’t discussed about the specific power dynamics within the creative writing workshop (reader/author, professor/student, etc.).

In a standard writing workshop of twenty students, no two students will share the same goal with their writing. Not only that, but individual students also have numerous, unique goals with their writing. Though it is perhaps the prototype example of something easier said than done, “Creative writing pedagogy should focus on student’s unique goals and interests with both reading and writing.” (Girardi iii) For example, a student that is usually looking to become published may instead submit a piece to the workshop that is specifically crafted as a stress-relieving piece of writing. Moreover, “the [creative writing] discipline is a failure if it understands itself solely in the careerist terms of the production of professional literary writers” (Leahy, *Creativity, Caring, and the Easy ‘A’: Rethinking the Role of Self-Esteem in Creative Writing Pedagogy* 61) meaning that if instructors solely focus on a goal of eventual publication in creative writing workshops, the professor and students will miss a plethora of other goals. “Only 10 percent of master of fine arts graduates – that is, graduate students, not undergraduates – go on to publish books” (Leahy *Creativity, Caring, and the Easy ‘A’: Rethinking the Role of Self-Esteem in Creative Writing Pedagogy* 61). Though this statistic is focused on graduate students, it goes to show that even those students at the *next* level do not end up publishing frequently—which means the percentage of undergraduate students eventually being published would be *even less*. Despite this range in the author’s purpose, the current workshop model at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse (UW-L) would, unfortunately, remain the same.

### *The UW-L Workshop (Reader-Focused)*

This begs the question: how is creative writing *taught* at UW-L? As it currently stands, UW-L creative writing classes are limited to the 300/400 level and rely heavily on the generic workshop model for education. **For context, a working definition of the “workshop model” as used in UW-L creative writing programs is:** a mode of instruction in which writers share works in progress with a community of writers in hopes of receiving useful peer feedback to help revise and thus improve their pieces of writing for the future.

In these classes, the instructor is viewed as an equal/participant when the workshop begins but is otherwise viewed as a traditional instructor when the workshop is not in session. The workshop model is, at its core, a group of peers focusing on the writing of one of their colleagues in an attempt to “improve” the piece. However, as suggested, the definition of “improve” is malleable—a trait that a generic workshop model does not account for.

In some literature on this topic, it has been proposed that the instructor should be viewed as an absolute equal during both the coursework and workshop sessions (McAbee 244). What this means is—the instructor will submit the same assignments/workload as the students and be viewed as just another voice in the crowd during

workshops; thus, the students will have access to the professor's work and see how their own can be improved while offering the insight into how to improve the instructor's work as well. This results in a greater sense of *community* within the class and workshop because there is less of a presumed hierarchy within the classroom. However, one downfall to this strategy is that it includes much more work for the instructor and runs the risk of the classroom plunging into chaos. Also, this possible amendment doesn't solve an inherent problem with the current workshop model implemented by UW-L creative writing—the lack of focus on the author.

The UW-L workshop focuses on the readers and their response to the physical piece of writing at hand. This is not a problem in and of itself, but problems arise when the author's purpose is not taken into account. Analyzing the author's purpose in *published* literature hinders the understanding and interpretation of the work, but, for *in-progress* pieces of writing, **I argue that the author's purpose is of the utmost importance.**

### *Focus on the Author's Purpose*

As a reader in workshops, the question I always want to ask but am not afforded the opportunity is: "What are you trying to do with this piece?"

The question has both literal and subtextual implications:

"Do you want to see this piece published?"

Are you experimenting with a new style?"

What do you want me, as a reader, to take away from this piece?"

Without knowing what an author is trying to do with a specific draft they submit to the workshop, it is *impossible* to know whether or not they achieved their goals, and, more importantly, readers cannot provide useful revision suggestions. The audience of in-progress works *needs* to know the author's intent to provide worthwhile feedback. If a piece was written as a stress-relief or trauma-coping work of art then it would have drastically different "useful" feedback compared to if the author was seeking publication.

The focus on the author is not new to creative writing pedagogy. Sigmund Freud wondered how the conception of ideas produces itself within the author, "laymen have always been intensely curious to know . . . from what source that strange being, the creative writer, draws his material, and how he manages to make such an impression on us with it, and to arouse in us emotions of which, perhaps, we had not even thought ourselves capable" and further explains that the ideas presented by the author are their reflection of the lives they have led and the experiences they've had (Freud 420). In recent years, this idea of "storying the self" has been presented by Moriarty and Adamson—who argue that "autobiographical storytelling has a powerful place in reflexivity and meaning-making" (3) This psychological approach to creative writing and meaning-making being an internal struggle within a singular student's consciousness is compelling because of the significance it places on the author themselves. When it comes to creative writing—the author is *equally* as important as the reader. However, in the workshop process, the readers are given full control over the critiques and feedback which treats the piece as an already published piece of literature—the workshop focuses on the final product over the process of producing work (Skains 87) This is a double-edged sword—it provides sometimes *excellent* feedback on a piece of writing as if it has already been published, but, the problem is. . .it's *not* published. The writing is still in malleable form—able to bend to the will of the writer. The writer will undoubtedly use this power to inflect some of their own beliefs into the story because "[storying the self] encourages students to identify those things within themselves that they want to write about and to develop skill with prose. . .to tell the tales that have shaped their own identities in relation to others" (Moriarty & Adamson 3). The author is the focal point of the writing process but is paradoxically ignored during the workshop process.

This detrimental shut-out of the author in the current workshop model at UW-L is manifested in the so-called "gag rule". For background, the "gag rule" essentially means that the author of the piece currently being discussed is not allowed to say anything about their piece and must metaphorically gag themselves while their piece is discussed. According to Skains, [the gag rule] silences the author whose work is being discussed; it focuses on flaws in the work according to the group consensus (85). This is problematic because the author can feel a sense of powerlessness surrounding their writing and the resulting discussion can be traumatic for the author if fellow

members have trouble understanding the piece or give unhelpful, condescending feedback (Kearns 791). By silencing the author during the discussion of her work, it destabilizes the necessarily dialogic nature of the writing process, and it undercuts itself by ultimately privileging the voice of the reader over that of the author. (Starkey 250).

Some authors, such as Wendy Bishop, suggest a modification to this rule where the writer is allowed to interject, and the readers can ask the author open-ended questions and engage in a greater sense of community with the group of equals. She argues for a “‘transactional workshop’ led by students and empowering the author’s voice to direct their own feedback, situated in the context of their goals and practice” (Bishop & Ostrom 14). As a result, the workshop could feel more like a community of writers (which is its intention) rather than a group of critics judging a certain piece under a magnifying glass.

### *Writer’s Room as a Workshop*

These communities of creative writing are how creative writers get work done. With TV and film production, there is a “writer’s room” where the writers will get together and discuss plans for the project. “[The] writer’s [room] also consecrates the initial place of individual creation as an act connected with ownership of a space, a method, and, by extension, the literary products that emerge from this space” (Battershill 6) which refers to space of a *single* writer in this case, but I argue that this sense of ownership within a metaphorical writers’ room could be just as beneficial to the writers involved because there is a sense of togetherness and unity in the final product of a writers’ room. This collaboration is completely different from the workshop model of instruction. Instead of criticizing a piece with no feedback from the author, the writers discuss the intention of the author and work together to bring that intention to the forefront of the piece or perhaps change the purpose altogether, depending on the situation. A notable difference between the workshop and a “writers’ room” is that each student in the workshop is working on their own piece of writing rather than working together on a larger project. This leads authors to suggest that a group collaboration simulating a real-life “writers’ room” may be beneficial for the students involved (Battershill 7). For example, the students in a given course could be tasked with planning and writing a six-episode run of a TV series or a six-chapter section of a novel—where each piece feeds into the other and the collaboration and community of the writers involved is at the forefront of the activity (see “Instructor Notes” segment below). The downside of this writers’ room method of instruction is that sometimes these collaborative efforts can become toxic and one writer may end up taking over or being stuck with all of the work that the others refuse to do. However, this downside is also an issue in *any* setting involving group collaboration—it is by no means unique to the creative writing discipline. Therefore, this potential downside to the writers’ room method of instruction could actually benefit the students and instructor involved because it simulates real-life situations of group collaboration in any field that they may be entering.

### *Coming Back to the Author*

Further, this aspect of “community” is at the forefront of teaching creative writing—as suggested by the “professor as a student” and “writers’ room” models listed above. However, this can be problematic because, even in a collaborative setting, the author is almost always a *single person*. The increase in perspective afforded by the models listed above can be wholly beneficial to the author, but so many different opinions can be disorienting and non-beneficial for the revision of some pieces. All writing is viewed as a “work in progress” in the workshop model, but even this arguably “universal” understanding of creative writing workshops is being challenged. Instead of viewing the works as incomplete, some sources have suggested viewing the works as more or less complete where each decision is intentional and thought-provoking rather than something that needs to be changed down to its roots. This is vastly different from the *current* views regarding creative writing as well as its *origins*—“[creative writing pedagogy began as] an institutional arrangement for treating literature as if it were a continuous experience rather than a mere corpus of knowledge” (Myers 279) where creative writing has always been viewed as a work-in-progress in virtually all circumstances. This approach to creative writing as literature is a fundamental difference in approach from what has been discussed thus far and what has been taught in the past. A worthwhile comparison would be to view this possible teaching model like you would a literature class—the students are given a completed work and asked to interpret the meaning/feeling they received from their reading. The author of the given literature just so happens to be a classmate. Just as in a literature class, the readers in the creative writing class would not be

expected to provide advice to the author (something tells me Edgar Allan Poe isn't rolling in his grave when an undergraduate student finds "The Raven" trite). Rather, the students would be asked to provide their interpretation of the piece as it currently stands—as if no other changes were going to be made in the future—“The execution [of revision] belongs to the author alone; it is what is most personal to him, and we measure him by that . . . his manner is his secret” (James 4).

As a result, the author is given different interpretations of their piece without being suggested to make specific alterations. The reader may say something along the lines of, “This part of your story made me feel apprehensive toward the main character.” From this, the author can decide whether or not to change the source material based on that reading. *Is that the feeling they were hoping to evoke? Is that emotion better for the story than what they originally intended?* This amendment is notable because these questions and what to do about their answers are left to the *sole discretion* of the author. This means that the author is afforded all of the revision power because they do not take specific suggestions or change their work based on what fellow students (their readers) suggest.

While this newfound authorial power is refreshing, treating a creative writing workshop like a literature class presents its own unique problems. As mentioned above, considering the author's intent when discussing *published* literature can be detrimental to the analysis because it could result in the community devolving into narrow-minded views of the piece at hand. For example, a piece of writing with comedic elements may be submitted to the workshop that the readers do not find funny—this results in the readers saying that the author “failed” in their purpose. However, the intention of the piece could have been focused on satire rather than direct comedy—in which case, the author may have succeeded but it might never be brought up during discussion because the class is so focused on the missteps of comedic timing, set-up, etc. that they miss a purpose beneath the surface. It's possible for the author to succeed in one way and not another, so viewing works as “complete” during the workshop process could pose problems investigating subtextual themes presented by the author.

#### *Author Directed Feedback*

Another author-centered workshop model that has been proposed is one in which the author is given virtually unlimited power in their workshop. They can dictate what is discussed and tailor the conversation to fit their needs as an author. On the surface, this is hugely beneficial to the author as they get to lead the discussion about their piece and receive feedback that they deem the most important. On the other hand, problems can arise from this through the author being unable to receive raw, unprovoked feedback as seen in the reader-centered workshop model. In other words, feedback led by the author may reduce the productivity of the feedback because it compels cyclical thinking on behalf of the author. Without the free-thinking of the current workshop model, the audience could withhold valuable feedback because their feedback was centered around an aspect of the piece that the author did not ask about. In short, the author may not ask about all of the essential aspects of feedback in their writing despite being the one that wrote it; it can be hard to see a piece from all angles when you stare at your screen the same way for months upon months at any given time. Unaltered reader feedback could remedy this.

#### *Is the Workshop Unteachable?*

In essence, the purpose of the author writing the piece *should* be considered in workshops, but it *should not* hinder the way the audience reads the piece—it should be considered when the audience provides feedback to the author but not become the sole focus of the workshop at hand. This is where I will bring up the cliché reference to a “*Goldilocks zone*”—there exists a method of creative writing instruction where there isn't too much or too little interference from the readers nor the author. However, the story of Goldilocks—believe it or not—is a fictional story. Perhaps that makes it the perfect analogy for optimizing creative writing pedagogy because that zone may not exist in the real world. However, “the term and concept of creative writing studies is the logical response to a perceived Goldilocks problem in which creative writing seems too hot or too soft” shows that the discipline of creative writing pedagogy arose from apprehension towards dichotomous teaching methods (author-centric vs. reader-centric) and the only way to embrace the true power of creative writing education is to strike a balance between the two approaches (among other compromises) (Leahy, *Against Creative Writing Studies (and for Ish-Ness)* 1).

From these different interpretations of creative writing pedagogy, it is evident that there is no one, true, correct way to teach creative writing—just as there is no one, true, correct piece of creative writing. **The shades of gray brought to the table in creative writing pedagogy are paradoxically the greatest advantage that writing has over other disciplines as well as its greatest hindrance.** From this, it can be concluded that there is a *Goldilocks* zone of feedback and workshopping that manages to balance: author purpose, peer feedback, and instructor input all in perfect harmony. The following section will detail the means to find this zone.

## RESULTS

Here I will theorize the best methodology for teaching creative writing. These notes will help serve as inspiration or as a reminder for things to consider as creative writing professors teach courses and form individual lesson plans. I will reiterate here that all of my observations and theories come from my *novice* understanding of creative writing pedagogy as a student and my thorough background research presented above.

### *Establish Rapport*

This seems like it should go without saying, but, arguably, this is the *most important* facet of any creative writing professor's arsenal. Unlike other courses such as biology, where the professors have definitively correct information, creative writing is built on its subjectivity—as mentioned above. What this means is, instructors need to have a stable, productive relationship with their students for the students to trust the advice they are given as well as be comfortable coming to their professor for advice. One common practice is coming to class on the first day dressed casually (jeans, t-shirt) if allowed by the Dean's office. Students will be psychologically (perhaps subconsciously) more comfortable with a professor that is dressed similarly to themselves. It will immediately increase their comfort with their professor if they see them in more casual attire. This idea would bring a greater sense of community to the classroom right off the bat. As opposed to other literature classes where instructors come strapped with leather patches and spectacles the size of Rhode Island, a more casual style of dress will ease students into the idea and philosophy of creative writing—it is by no means a “casual” subject but rather the casual approach to instruction and practice allows students more freedom to express creativity and novel ideas. If a professor appears too sophisticated, the students may become apprehensive and nervous to speak out because of the fear of being scolded or labeled “incorrect” despite having a subjective thought. However, this style of dress may not be practical in all universities or with all professors—for example, disadvantaged groups must wear more professional attire to appear as professional as their privileged counterparts. The argument could be made that the casual necessities of creative writing should supersede the dress code, but, unfortunately, this is unrealistic for many groups.

Further, an excellent way to start a first round of creative writing classes would be, to begin with students creating a one/two-sentence story that is simply graded on completion. The advice provided on their extremely short stories could be beneficial because the students will be able to see how closely the professor interprets texts as well as see the style of feedback that this specific professor tends to give. If students are comfortable, it could be fun to share these short snippets aloud with the class as many of them likely use creativity to navigate the extremely short length requirement. Not only could it be fun for the students, but it will also provide essential rapport between students as well as between students and the professor. Targeted groups that often have their opinions and stories shunned may feel more welcome to share their experiences in class, or, if they so choose, they can omit their snippets from being shared. This shows the students that the writing is more about the process than the actual result of their writing—but the students who share will surely benefit from the quick feedback and peer reactions. If nothing else, those students that choose to share will be better prepared for the workshopping yet to come.

Establishing rapport is an essential first step to teaching creative writing, and the best course of action in this regard is to be relaxed and casual when talking to a creative writing class for the first time. If a professor, to use a horrible cliché, “brings the hammer down” on day one, they will likely lose a significant percentage of students and shy those members away from sharing in the future. This suggestion is not unique to creative writing, as many pedagogical methods involve a more subdued and casual approach to teaching students (at least initially in most, if not all cases). The goal of the creative writing classroom is first and foremost to “improve” the writing of the students involved, and, as mentioned in the previous section, increasing the sense of community and collaboration within the classroom is the best way to go about this.

### *Set Clear Expectations*

Another aspect of teaching that will be mandatory right away is establishing the expectations for the course clearly and concisely. This is another idea that is not unique to creative writing, but because of its subjective evaluation compared to other courses' objective evaluations, it is important to have everyone on the same page when it comes to grading and coursework. This is another instance where diversity in the role of professor and student is important but may lead to some subconscious resistance from the other party. To expand on this, imagine a disadvantaged student learning that their completely subjective work of art will be graded by a professor of significant privilege (or even vice-versa, where a privileged student is being told this by a disadvantaged professor). This situation would be off-putting to the disadvantaged student. That student may ask, "How are you going to grade our work? Quality? Publish-ability? Completion?", which is a valid question that will depend on the piece of writing. The student's apprehension toward being evaluated by a professor with a higher degree of privilege would immediately create some tension within that relationship. The professor must encourage this student and others in the class to collaborate as much as they feel comfortable within that classroom setting. If the classroom is a more welcoming environment for students with less than privileged backgrounds, it stands to reason that they will be more likely to share their compelling stories of adversity that they haven't had a chance to express previously.

On the first day, the professor should lay out all of the major assignments and how they will be graded (as well as minor assignments: participation, small writing pieces, etc.) to help the students ease into the course. To ease the power dynamic and tension between students/professors, it will be important for the professor to directly reference the subjectivity in creative writing instruction and evaluation and lay out how pieces will be graded—so there are no surprises. Also, the professor must make it abundantly clear that the students will not be judged in comparison to one another, instead, their works will be graded on their merit. Grading on a curve in creative writing has been a tool used in the archaic introduction of the subject into higher education, but, as pedagogy has developed, creative writing has developed alongside it. This means that the instruction mode of creative writing should do away with the universal paradigm of grading pieces against each other because no two individuals nor their writing are the same. Therefore, they cannot truly be compared objectively. To go back to the example with a disadvantaged student, informing said student that their work will be judged equally with their privileged peers would be detrimental to their outlook on the class and would deflate any confidence they may have.

Further, this could be a point where bringing in a more author-centric approach to teaching creative writing would be beneficial. For example, if a student is writing a piece for self-reflection and trauma-coping rather than for widespread publication, the professor must let the students know far in advance that this style of writing is an excellent option and their different reasons for writing their works will be taken into account in the grading process. However, the student must also be informed at this stage if there will be a workshopping session with one of the larger pieces. If they would be uncomfortable sharing something they wrote with the rest of their peers, they should have that knowledge as soon as possible so they do not write something that may thicken their trauma if shared with the class. Any student may have trouble understanding these guidelines immediately after the course begins, so the professor should be aware of this and encourage them to ask questions as the coursework progresses. During the typical "syllabus day" on the first day of class, it would be beneficial for the professor to ask for students' insights and opinions on the syllabus and any changes that should be made. Even if the changes are rather superfluous, the very idea of bringing students into the syllabus procedure and allowing them to control their writing gives them a taste of what is to come in the creative writing classroom.

### *Open-Door Policy*

This policy is the idea that the classroom door remains literally and figuratively open at all times. If any student feels uncomfortable with a particular reading or discussion, the professor must inform them of their right to exit the class and come back when they are ready. The professor, being naturally concerned with their students, may want to check in with said student after they utilize this policy, so the professor may have to briefly follow up with the student after they exit, but the student should always feel free to exit the class with no questions asked. This policy will benefit the students working in the classroom because they will not be forced to engage with a piece of writing that makes them uncomfortable to a detrimental degree. However, the goal of creative writing (in most cases) is to

make the reader uncomfortable to a certain degree, so this open-door policy should be encouraged with the footnote that some pieces shared in class might be purposefully crude or shocking.

Additionally, the open-door policy should extend to the workshop sessions presented by the students. While a student unfamiliar with the policy may feel offended when a student exits the room during their session if the professor establishes this rule on the first day of instruction, the student who submitted their writing is more likely to be understanding. Alternatively, if the student reading a piece feels uncomfortable without an open-door policy, they will have to suffer in silence and may feel discouraged from writing edgier pieces in the future because of how that workshop made them feel as a reader. Regardless of content, any student should feel welcome to exit at any time—for any reason—with the expectation that a quick follow-up from the professor will likely follow. This open-door policy will benefit all students but specifically disadvantaged students if a piece contains delicate material. For another cliché example, if a creative writing professor uses an excerpt from *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (which is notorious for its use of derogatory language directed at African Americans) black students would understandably face a complicated emotional situation. While a professor might never use this extreme of an example, there are certainly cases where brief uses of slurs or strong language can be enough to cause a displeasing situation for students of any background. With an open-door policy, a student feels more inclined to exit the classroom during an uncomfortable session because they know that the professor will not take offense nor inflict repercussions of any kind beyond a quick check-in.

The goal of the open-door policy is to create a(n) (ironically) welcoming, safe environment for the students of the creative writing classroom. If the student feels as though they are not being forced to engage with a topic that makes them uncomfortable, they will be more inclined to participate when the pieces do not evoke an adverse reaction. Also, students, knowing that their peers can exit at any time, may feel more inclined to write something daring that pushes the boundaries. It is up to the professor to ensure that the student doesn't push things *too far* by reading the submitted pieces before workshop days. Content warnings go a long way in creating an atmosphere where students can be comfortable and know if a piece may contain a trigger that they wish to avoid when reading.

### *Reader-Centered Feedback*

This is the point where creative writing pedagogy takes over the instructor's notes. At the beginning of a workshop session, an ideal start would be for the readers of the piece to provide raw, unaltered feedback for the first half of the time slot (after the author briefly provides their purpose for writing said piece). For example, if a student says they are writing a piece for someone special that they care about, the readers then can encourage the author to think about specific events they encountered with that person and, hopefully, spark an idea for something the author hadn't previously thought of. Although this is a vague example, it shows how readers' feedback can be enhanced if given the author's purpose beforehand. If they had not been told it was a piece for someone specifically, they might offer feedback on the plot/characters that is completely irrelevant to the author and essentially wastes everyone's time. The point is, readers still must play a major role in the feedback session of the workshop, but the inclusion of the author's intent beforehand will likely enhance the feedback that they give as well as where the piece will eventually end up. Importantly, the author still must restrain themselves for the first half of their workshop session because a fully author-centered approach to the workshop would box the piece in and not allow for all beneficial avenues to be explored.

### *Author-Centered Approach*

After the readers are allotted some time for feedback, the author will then "take over" the discussion for the remaining period. Professors should want their discussion workshops to adhere to their author's wants and needs. As it currently stands, the authors in workshops at UW-L are more or less powerless during the workshop, and professors should want their classrooms to bring at least some of the power back to the writer—after all, they have the final say with anything and everything involving their piece of writing during revision. Going back to the author's purpose, a student may not be comfortable with revealing their intentions behind writing a piece. For example, if a student submits a draft involving suicide or a story about how they have been harassed or assaulted under a fictional premise, then they can keep any of that information to themselves. If that is the case, professors should recommend that the writer be as vague as possible when asking for feedback from students; ex: "I'm writing



this piece not to be published but just because it helps me relieve some stress.”, which is an excellent way for a student to receive meaningful feedback without being too revealing. The most important point is—the guidance of the discussion is left open to the author for the second half of the workshop session. This current plan is to use this author-centered approach to creative writing in conjunction with a more reader-centered approach to feedback.

### *Role of the Instructor*

The role of the instructor will be to facilitate the conversations between students and chime in whenever the conversation becomes stale or side-tracked based on the author’s intent/feedback. It is much easier said than done. They will need to find a *balance* between constant feedback and remaining completely silent that works for both the readers and the author. To help with this, they should consider including one of their in-progress works to show the class to further bolster the sense of community in the group as well as give them a template for how a workshop session should be conducted. From that, it challenges the students to lead the discussion on their own right off the bat because, as the author, the professor won’t be able to chime in nearly as often as if they were just a reader. To save time, it would have to be an expedited workshop session (also, the focus should always remain on the students first and foremost), but including personal works to help level the playing field as well as show students how a workshop session should be held would be beneficial for everyone involved. It will make the professor feel more comfortable addressing everyone in future classes because their submission would help break down the power dynamic between student/professor and allow for a true sense of community that all of these notes have been striving to achieve.

## CONCLUSION

Creative writing pedagogy, much like the lives it hopes to express and grow, is all about *balance*. Balancing the time of class between author and reader feedback. Balancing the power of the student and the power of the professor. Balancing the experience of the privileged student and the disadvantaged student. Balancing all of these aspects of the creative writing workshop in an attempt to improve the lives, critical thinking, and ethics of the students involved through a community of writers with unique goals and aspirations.

The task sounds insurmountable. At times, I think it might be. However, through my years of pedagogical research and my learning in workshop-dominated classroom settings, I have to say—I don’t think creative writing is unteachable. Inspiration may be unteachable, but fostering an environment where inspiration can occur naturally between students, professors, amateur writing, published writing, authors, and readers is not only plausible—I have *seen it* in action. With a few tweaks, namely placing more workshop power in the hands of the author, I truly think creative writing pedagogy will have reached its maximum potential. As with the world around it, effective pedagogy is always changing, so as long as creative writing professors continue to adapt to the evolution of society and education, I am wholly optimistic for the future of the discipline and my place within it.

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