



Terry Ann Thaxton

Workshop Wild

I come to class with a pressure gauge in place of one of my eyes and a temperature gauge as the other. The grandfather clock on top of my head is to let them know I've been doing this a while. Imposter syndrome. I have it. I walk into the room. They are all looking at me, and before things even get started, I want to drop kick myself out the door. But I don't. I stay. I let them talk. Even though there is sky behind me that I could easily escape into, I stay. I don't know how it is possible that I've been teaching for over twenty years and still have anything worthwhile to say. They have nothing to learn from me.

On the first night of class, I show them a YouTube video of Gil Scott Heron's "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised," released in 1970, which surprises them because it's Spoken Word (with music!) that existed before most of them they were born.

Writing is about resisting, about revolution, I tell them. And then, I ask, *What are you revolting against in your writing?* I speak first: *I'm writing against what I was told my childhood was.* They're graduate students; they get it. Many of them, like me, are writing against the version of their childhood that they were told by parents, friends, family, or teachers. They're mining memory for what they believe actually happened. They're writing against the myth of childhood in their essays and poems. They do this to discover their own truth. Someone states that she "absolutely loves thinking of writing as revolting against what they've been told." We talk about how the truth of one sibling might not be the truth of another, and if the other sibling had been given stronger agency when they were children, then the writer's version was silenced or stifled. It takes some of them a few minutes to think through what it is they're writing against. We discuss

the societal norms and the popular culture of the time they write about most. For most of them, they hadn't thought of writing as revolutionary.

Just like when I grow tired of the ruts in my writing, I've grown tired of workshops. I've been teaching the conventional studio method for too long, and I'm bored with it. I tell my graduate students—poets and nonfiction writers—that this semester each workshop participant will choose the way she wants her workshop time spent. I give them some possibilities.

Since our MFA program does not have enough poets or enough nonfiction writers to fill a single graduate workshop, and because I'm particularly interested in hybrid and experimental forms of writing, I offer to teach this section of graduate workshop with nonfiction writers and poets. The nonfiction writers are hiding behind trees, afraid they won't know how to talk about line breaks in poems. I bring in a stack of handouts and a booklist for them so that the nonfiction writers can catch up on prosody. I remind them that they probably know more than they're giving themselves credit for. Some of them even write a poem or two for practice. The poems are strong, wicked, beautiful, and heartbreaking.

During the summer before workshop starts, when I'm planning for class, I ask colleagues around the country for ideas for different ways to run workshop. One colleague suggests April Ossman's method of workshop in which she turns the "traditional workshop model on its head by asking the author being critiqued to speak first and critique her/his own work, noting correlations between the criticisms s/he has for other participants' works (written down in advance of the workshop) and her/his own before group discussion of the work begins." I tell my students that for their workshop, they can do this, design their own type of workshop, or let me design workshop.

The students are game. They want something wild.

Time travel: In 2009, I attend a conference in Wales—New Writing Conference—for all English-speaking creative writing teachers. I attend a couple of panels, and quickly realize that when the British and Australians are talking about “workshop,” they’re not talking about the Iowa method. They’re talking about providing writing prompts that get students writing during class. In conversations, I learn that the most common way workshop runs in the UK is by using generative prompts during class time, and the teacher only gives feedback on each person’s writing. I attend this conference with a two of my colleagues, and we tell them what we mean when we say “workshop.” Some of the non-American teachers are surprised that we have students critique their peers’ writing. They talk about how much writing they get out of their students, how challenged they are, how the students are not just writing creatively, but also conduct research on issues related to creative writing. One student at the conference gives a presentation on the history of coffee shop workshops, how aspiring writers would figure out which café a particular writer went to write, and the aspiring writers would come to ask the “master writer” questions and for advice. I’m reminded that at least one of the intentions of the Iowa method has always been that the teacher is the master artist, and each student is an apprentice or protégé. Yet in some of my own “workshop” classes, students perceive the model as a peer review session rather than a form of mentor/mentee. I have students, usually undergraduate students, who tell me at the end of the semester that they decided not to revise a piece because, even though I tell them the poem needs revising, everyone else in class thinks it was brilliant, so they decided that I just didn’t “get it.” Too often these students don’t use any of my suggestions. I tell them this is fine, although it will affect their grade, much like if I send a piece of writing to a journal and the editor asks for changes, but I decide not to make the changes because I don’t want to, then it is likely my piece won’t be published in that journal. At the conference in Wales, I am fascinated by the myriad of ways teachers teach creative writing. I meet Graeme Harper, the publisher of *Multilingual Matters*, a series of creative writing pedagogy books. I realize that I’ve been teaching creative writing based on a collective assumption of how creative writing should be taught.

Philip Gross, writer and professor of creative writing in Wales, offers up different approaches to workshop. He calls one of his workshops “The Ideas Workshop,” which involves students “pitching” ideas “for development and exploration in the group” (55). Another type of workshop he teaches is a “Masterclass,” in which the teacher “gives a few writers’ work intensive feedback.” Still another type is a “whole group” experience, in which there is “a pause for everyone to write notes of what they would say if they spoke first,” and then Gross hands “the writer of the piece the first-thought comments at the end” (60).

The conference creates a shift in my pedagogy, leaves me with questions about how to get the best writing from students, how to help them write better than when they first enter the class.

The first workshop in the fall semester is Lorie, a poet. She and I brainstorm what we might do for her workshop since most people in the class are afraid to critique poetry. I suggest she teach her poem to the class. Her poem is titled “Men Get Sick of Me.” The poem opens by describing the relief of Generals Robert E. Lee, “Stonewall” Jackson, and President Jefferson Davis on the side of Stone Mountain in Georgia. Lorie uses Adobe Spark as a visual tool for teaching her poem. She combines cultural context with poetic strategies to present the poem to workshop. We learn about the female architect who, in the 1930s and 40s, designed six of the primary buildings on the edge of the Grand Canyon. The poem also references Zahah Hadid, another female architect who designed buildings with enormous curves.

Lorie takes us through the content of the poem with an Adobe Spark image for different aspects of the poem. As she teaches the poem, she poses questions that she wants answered once she has finished the presentation, such as “Are the threads all tying together?”

The speaker in the poem asks, “If I carve my face in a pecan tree, how long // would it take for the bark to take it back?” Threads of buildings and people on the edge of things, carving faces into stone, hard and soft places, and trees weave their way through the poem. Once Lorie finishes the presentation,

she opens it up for discussion and comments. Her peers compliment her visual presentation and the poem, and we have a real conversation—one between writer and readers. We talk about the content, what we've learned about female architects, the monuments erected to glorify men, the lack of general knowledge about female architects. Our conversation goes back and forth between content and form.

After workshop, students talk about how much they learned about reading a poem, and how the form worked with the poem's content. Lorie, later, says, "It was fun to do it this way. It felt like moving through workshop backwards."

Amy turns in an essay for workshop, and she asks me to decide how to run workshop. Amy's essay is packed with images, sometimes the images are so dense, the meaning of the sentence gets lost.

Too often in workshops, a few students do most of the talking, while the quieter ones remain quiet. I try a new way of making sure each student has something to say, but I don't want to just go around the room. I ask one student to talk about all of the positive things in Amy's essay. He speaks for five minutes. Amy is flush with pride. She's loving it. Then I stand at the front of the room, and project a blank Word document onto the screen. Then, we go around the room. But instead of comments, I have each student ask a question about the essay. I type the question on the blank document projected on the screen. I collect ten questions, and then I pause, and ask another student to sing the praises of the essay. Then I do another round of questions. The point is not for anyone to answer the questions now. I just type them out. The writer is nodding her head and smiling. After class, I email the questions to the writer, and it is through these questions she can see the holes, the places that need expanding, the intentions that work and those that don't. With the questions, though, the readers have to reframe their suggestions into questions, which turns the workshop model on its head. This gives Amy confidence to revise without the conflicting suggestions one often receives.

For another workshop, we go around the table again, but each student gets two minutes only. I cut them off once they've reached two minutes. This requires they be concise and direct. It's a challenge, but works for variety.

For now, I take the weather thermometer and the pressure gauge off my eyes. In their place tape a piece of paper over my eyes, with the word "BIRTH" on it. I want to see how that makes me feel. I am a collage. I have a child dangling out of my mouth as if he is a mouse, but my students think I'm real. They think I have something to teach them.

Robin, one of my students, is a professional oral storyteller. Her writing is gorgeous rhythmic prose. Nonfiction writers can turn in two short essays or one longer essay for workshop. Robin also asks me to come up with how to run her workshop. After reading her two essays, which were both good self-contained anecdotes, I want her to work on structure. Her profession is perhaps why her essays are always linear, always in chronological order. Perhaps this is why they are short. I put the class in groups of three. Each group pulls up her two essays on a laptop. In collaboration, each group restructures the two essays into one, using her words, but rearranging the timeframe. She ends up with three new versions of her two essays. In the process, my students debate structure, pacing, and details. They tell me how helpful it is to work with another person's essay like this. One group weaves moments from each essay together, so that the essay goes back and forth between the two anecdotes. One group removes about one-third of the language in each anecdote, combines the essays, but makes it a segmented essay. Another group, keeps them as separate essays, but tightens the language.

Robin talks about her workshop for the rest of the semester and into the next. Each time I see her, she talks about how seeing different versions of how to put the moments together helped her re-envision the way a story line works, and how two different memories can be woven together to create meaning.

Throughout the rest of the fall semester, the graduate students loosen up in workshop. One person talks about the opening of the piece and discussion flows from one person to the other. They excite each other with their ideas. I see them not only want to give and take criticism, but I see them gain enormous level of respect for each other's writing. By the end of fall semester, they are suggesting restructuring, finding portals for new material, pushing the writer for more vulnerability—all with the deep respect that usually only comes when writers have been working together for years.

The following semester, due to scheduling, I luck out and get the same group of students. I offer them the option of choosing any style of workshop for their own piece. They consider the options, but we find, together—students and teacher—that the conventional workshop method is working, but it's on a different level. They've become each other's trusted readers. The level of trust for each other is only here, I believe, because during that first semester, we took risks with the conventional workshop. Each student and I discussed what approach they thought would be best for their own work. Now they are champions of each other's work, they're excited to talk about everyone's piece—they are not just waiting for their own workshop—they want to talk about each other's writing just as much as they want to hear about their own.

The first semester together, in addition to writing new pieces for workshop, I require each of them to find other writers who write against the same things they write against. They develop an annotated bibliography that includes writers from several different generations. Our second semester together, I require a new piece of writing each week—a very rough draft, 750 words or less that they don't have to show to anyone except me. Do it or don't; credit or no credit. They want to show each other. They want to see each other's writing. They take risks in their writing I've never seen before. I create a space on our online portal for them to post their 750-word pieces for others to see and comment on if they wish.

The risks I see in the writing, I believe, is directly linked to the restructuring of workshop, challenging what workshop is and its purpose. This translates to their writing. We don't adhere to a single

structure for class, and this makes them free to not adhere to prescribed structures for their own writing. Having two graduate workshops in succession in a single academic year is uncommon at my university, but like the conference in Wales, I now see the conventional workshop as a fallback position.

The students hug deer, they dig deep holes to find buried memories that will make everything make sense to them, they light fires on the paper dresses they've been wearing because they are that brave. They call rain from the sky, and dare the clouds covering their entire head to burst open. I see them walking in a forest, red hood on their head. I tell them to keep going, to open the door, to step in, to pull back the heavy blanket of memory and see whether or not who they thought was their mother is really their mother, a hunter, or a wolf. Or if it is a new essay.

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