Research Space
Journal article

New ways to workshop: Destressing, decentring, decolonising

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NEW WAYS TO WORKSHOP:
DESTRESSING, DECENTRING, DECOLONISING
By Peggy Riley

Why do we workshop? How do we workshop? Who is the workshop for?

The workshop process isn't one-size-fits-all. As teachers, we may use methods that work for us as writers or ones that we were trained to use as students ourselves. If we want writing workshops to really serve the writers we are working with, how do we know what works? And how can the workshop process in general be more compassionate, accessible, and inclusive in these times?

I first trained as a playwright, and I continue to believe in the workshop process as a form of collaborative creativity, the idea being that a play is not finished until it has been read, rehearsed, and put onto its feet by the rest of the company – actors, designers, directors, producers, etc. As a Senior Lecturer, I took my assumptions about the collaborative nature of workshopping into the classroom, but I have become increasingly aware, particularly coming back to working face-to-face after the Covid online years, that my workshops were not serving my students. In fact, it was keeping them from engaging at all.

Recently I created a survey for our current cohort of third-year students of Creative & Professional Writing at Canterbury Christ Church University, all of them single honours who are taking a module on Professional Practice.

New Ways to Workshop: De-stressing, Decentring, Decolonising

Hello! I'm working on a paper and presentation about workshopping strategies for writers. I'd love your input about your experiences workshopping your work.

How have you received feedback about your work?

Have you taken part in any of the following?	YES	NO
Table workshops – anonymously		
Table workshops – work submitted with names		
Group workshops – work read out and discussed by others		
Group workshops – work read out by writers and discussed by others		
Feedback by email – work read by friends or tutors		
Any other method: (please explain)		

De-stressing:	YES	NO
Have fear or anxious feelings ever stopped you receiving feedback?		
Have you ever missed your own workshop, due to fear/anxious feelings?		
If yes, what would have helped you to turn up?		

If you have workshopped your work, how did it feel? Were there methods that helped you feel supported? Did anything happen in the workshop that made it feel uncomfortable?

Does space affect how you feel?	YES	NO
Chairs in a circle?		
Chairs around tables?		
Some other lay out?		
Is it better if everyone can see each other – or not?		

What has made things better for you? What has made things worse?

Decentring challenges "the Iowa model" where the writer is silent, letting those who read the work speak about the work before the writer can "explain or defend" the work. The assumption is that writers learn what isn't working or is missing from the work by hearing the questions and comments of readers.

To decentre the workshop, we offer the writer more autonomy. Writers are asked how they want to workshop and what they hope to get from it. Writers might introduce the work before it's read; they might frame the conversation or pose their own questions about their work, so that the feedback they receive is most useful.

Have you ever been asked to stay silent or not been invited to speak?

Have you wanted to explain or defend your work in advance of it being read? How might it have helped the way your workshop went or how you felt about it?

What would have made a difference to you receiving feedback that was more useful?

Decolonising: often workshops focus on ideas about what is "working" in terms of something being understandable or marketable. We talk about what editors and agents "want or expect" to read as well as the idea of a character being "relatable". This feeds into ideas that there is one type of "ideal reader" who will relate to characters who are Western, European, white, straight, neurotypical.

To decolonise a workshop means that we drop the expectation that a writer is writing "for us", particularly if our cultures are different. We would use caution when offering feedback about what they show or explain to the reader, particularly non-English terms, words, or customs, and we would use caution when offering feedback about their story structure, which might not be Western in its construction.

Have you ever experienced feedback about your work by someone who did not understand the culture you were discussing? Did you feel able to discuss this difference?

Has feedback ever sought to "correct" problems that you did not feel your work had?

Any other thoughts?

The questions cover their experience of writing workshopping, how it felt to workshop, and what specifically had made their experiences better or worse. I have previously written on my anti-anxiety work with students for NAWE, "The Writing Circle: Creative

Hope in Anxious Times" (2022), but anxiety continues to rise. In "Student mental health in England: Statistics, policy, and guidance", the authors report, "57% of university students self-reported a mental health issue, 36% had poor mental wellbeing, and 27% said they had a diagnosed medical condition" (Lewis & Stiebahl 2024). There are a variety of causes and reasons much broader than this paper can address, but we all recognise these figures. Even if we don't experience anxiety ourselves, we can see it in the news, among our friends and family, and probably in our students or workshop participants. In my questionnaire, my students reported the same. 100% self-reported experiencing or having experienced anxious feelings around workshopping, and 66% reported they had missed a workshop or feedback session due to anxiety. Obviously, this was very troubling.

In their first year, students take my module "Writing & Wellbeing" which asks them to develop the ability to write through difficult times and emotions, rather than waiting for them to pass before feeling able to write. I have seen students benefit from actively writing about and through their feelings, but I did not understand the effect their feelings had on their ability to workshop – to simply turn up. Often the experience of anxiety triggers "fight or flight" responses, with students likely to hide within or behind their anxiety, to say they are "too anxious" to do anything other than to experience this anxious state. They freeze or fly. It doesn't matter why anxiety is rising or how we might feel about anxiety personally, but it does matter that it is the experience of so many people, particularly young people. And it matters that it is affecting how students feel about their work, their abilities, and their futures. It matters that it is changing their ability to progress through systems, such as workshops, that I had always believed were essential for their work to develop. If I really wanted to help my students to achieve, I knew I had to rethink not only how we workshop but what such workshops were for.

DESTRESSING THE WORKSHOP:

If workshops are stressful, what can help students to attend and participate? To the question, "Were there methods that helped you feel supported?" several students noted that reinforcement about the nature of workshops was helpful. "Understanding workshops are for my benefit, not my detriment," one said, while another noted that more reminders about the workshop space being a "safe space for work to be looked at" would help. I felt that I was doing this, but I am now more explicit. I repeat myself more often than I had. Several students also commented that they understood their anxiety was often due to a lack of preparedness, offering that "better time management on my part" would help, and that "having more work ready" and "more work to show" would help them to feel more able to workshop. Increasingly, my sessions offer more time for students to generate material as well as to revise, well before the fixed dates of workshop and assessment that are so anxious-making.

Other students said that submitting their work anonymously felt better. "Having multiple (anonymous) works for giving and receiving feedback so it is not all attention on one person's work/one person – so it is not personal and more about the work." Of course, we discuss that feedback must be done with compassion across the cohort, but perhaps that message is not getting through. Anonymisation makes the idea of a

roundtable discussion or table reading of work more difficult, of course, but there is little point in scheduling such activities if students do not feel able to participate in them. We can facilitate this by making online submission points such as Padlets anonymous by default and by offering the opportunity to submit anonymously for written feedback from peers, while still aiming to increase confidence and resilience to build toward group workshops where writing can be shared and discussed aloud. The challenge is to build a stronger sense of community, so that everyone in a cohort trusts each other to give and receive feedback much earlier in the process.

Other students' answers centred around agency. Offering choices about how they submit work helps students to feel more in charge of the feedback process, while offering choice about when they submit work, helps them to prepare for receiving feedback more effectively. They want to decide when they are ready as well as be more in control over who is offering it to them. When feedback is offered, some students suggested that everyone should be asked to contribute, rather than asking "if anyone has feedback. No one is on the spot then because everyone is," they said. I know preface my requests for feedback by saying everyone must offer "at least one word".

To the question, "Did anything happen in the workshop that made it feel uncomfortable?" logistics were often discussed. If we want workshops to be more than anonymous and silent readings of text, the size, shape and layout of the room matter. Some students are highly sensitive as regards lighting, sound, the placement of furniture and the proximity of other students. While some reported happily sitting in a circle of desks, my default position, many reported a desire for less eye contact – another desire, perhaps, for anonymity. At our university, this has implications for timetabling as well, when rooms are at a premium, when we are not in control ourselves over which rooms we use or their capacities. But we can consider checking in with students about the room set-up in a workshop, before we begin. We can ask students how they want the room to look and feel, even if it's only about dimming the lights or

shifting the furniture. This might eat up some of our allotted time, but it might also help the time remaining to be more constructive. I can feel that students appreciate being considered in this way.

Students also offered a range of coping mechanisms and suggestions for things that they already do when feeling anxious in the room. To promote calm, we can support the use of headphones and earbuds to help deaden sound and background noise, trusting that students know when they need to do so. Because too much eye contact is hard, we can invite participants to doodle, draw spirals, or mark their journals during any feedback session or discussion, trusting that students are engaging as much as they can. And we can remember to schedule in breaks, even when time feels short. The chance to leave the workshop room and walk together with a classmate for fresh air, cups of tea, and the chance to burn off energy all aid focus and connection.

To encourage participation, we can employ more ground rules. Early on, we can let participants opt out of speaking while keeping the door open for them to do so, when they feel able, building toward requests for "at least one word" from everyone. We can establish the idea of raising hands to signal ability: an open hand means "call on me" while a fist means "don't call on me". Assuming we don't get a roomful of fists, it means that everyone can stay active during questions and discussions, that all arms go up, rather than none. And when there are questions, students suggest that "yes or no" and "opinions" are better than asking them to explain a concept or offer facts. I'm working now to implement such coping mechanisms into my modules and the workshop process, but if we can get them to turn up, how should workshops work?

DECENTRING THE WORKSHOP:

The Iowa model keeps the writer silent so that the group can offer feedback about the work. This is how I workshopped as a student, and it was often how I ran workshops as I began to teach. The students who took my survey all experience a range of things that place them in marginalised communities, but all are from the same geographical area – Kent and mostly East Kent. Though this is not true for our university or our course, this survey group of students was white, working class, two-thirds female, the first in their families to go to university, and the very first writers in their families.

To the question, "Have you ever been asked to stay silent or not been invited so speak?" students had a range of responses. One said, "I would have liked to introduce my piece before it was read out." Another said, "It's good to provide context on unfinished parts/gaps" or extracts, as it "avoids questions about parts that don't make sense without (it)." Particularly when the work is incomplete, it can be hard for workshops participants and me to know how to discuss the work without referencing what is missing or what might come next. I made assumptions that helping to plug such holes would be helpful, rather than letting writers plug them for us in the workshop.

Some of their answers surprised me, and I felt a certain embarrassment that I had not sufficiently checked in with them before workshops. It made me want to more actively engage with what they wanted from a workshop – and how that might differ to what I

thought they wanted or should want. Other students suggested that the Iowa model wasn't entirely unhelpful. "It's OK to allow others to feedback first before answering. (Speaking first) can improve people's understanding of feedback." One wise third year student had this to say:

> "I'm not offended by being asked not to speak. I would prefer to know how a reader came to interpret my work differently. Explaining the point doesn't help when done in advance if the point was always going to be lost. Knowing where others may have overlooked my intent is important for me to know and not influence, so I can work on improving where I failed the first time."

Though we aim not to speak of "failure" in the room, I felt heartened by this response, even if it wasn't every student's experience. The Iowa model relies on group perspectives, that readers help the writer understand what they have written. Feedback shows the writer where they are being "successful" and where there might be gaps of logic. Some student writers work well with this model, but I've come to understand it isn't the only way.

Until a few years ago, I did not even consider the effect of silencing the writer. In *Craft in the Real World* (2021) Matthew Salesses writes:

> "For more privileged writers, their decentering in workshop is countered by their centering in the rest of the world. A cis able white male who leaves workshop feeling disempowered usually finds the rest of his American life more than willing to empower him again. Someone less privileged leaves a disempowering workshop and faces the same disempowerment on a larger scale: though they should be in charge of their story, they are again made to listen to other people telling them what their story is or should be. The result is exactly the opposite of finding their voice – the real world silencing simply reinforces the idea that the marginalized writer should be writing toward the workshop and power" (126).

Salesses reminds me that decentring focuses on centring the writer and decentring the workshop participants, particularly those accustomed to speaking a lot, those used to having their opinions heard and "feeling ownership over the author's process" (127).

I also learned a lot from Gabrielle Fuentes in her article, "What is Workshop For?": On Utopia and Critique in the Creative Writing Classroom" (2024): "Over the years, I've worked out a dialogue-based workshop method that I believe works for me and my students: students share what is meaningful in the work, the author asks questions, the readers ask questions." If we want to centre the writer in the process, we can also aim to give them more agency about how they want to workshop. Specifically, what will the workshop offer to the writer as a means to develop their work on their terms? Fuentes draws on Liz Lerman's Critical Response Process (1990), as do I now, once students are able to move on from submitting anonymous paper or Padlet-based work. Lerman's process can be broken into four steps:

1: Statements of Meaning	2: Artist/Writer as Questioner	3: Neutral Questions	4: Opinion Time
• Responders state what was meaningful, evocative, interesting, exciting, and/or striking in the work	• Artist asks questions about the work. In answering, responders stay on topic with the question and may express opinions in direct response to the artist's questions	• Responders ask neutral questions about the work, and the artist responds. Questions are neutral when they do not have an opinion couched in them.	• Responders state opinions, subject to permission from the artist. The usual form is "I have an opinion about _____, would you like to hear it?" The artist has the option to say no.

I don't often move through Step 4 because I feel it serves to decentre the writer again – I don't want to end a workshop that way. When I have opinions about how the work could be improved for assessment, I certainly say – but I'm aware that such a practice also serves to centre me. If we're marking work beyond pass-fail, we have to deal with assessment criteria, and not being honest about how work can get a "better mark" also serves to increase anxiety.

Gabrielle Fuentes' article also sent me to Jesse Ball's work on The Asking, which I've yet to try. She notes that The Asking is "structured in exactly the opposite way as the Iowa method." Based on Quaker dialogues, students ask the workshopped writer questions. Through a mediator, the writer can choose to answer or decline:

> "The point … was not for the writer to defend her choices, but to make discoveries, make mistakes, "contradict herself" and "try out different positions relative to her work" (Ball 114). The role of the teacher was to ask questions alongside the students, to intervene only when "larger issues" demanded such (Ball 114). There were no suggestions given, no judgements of the works pronounced, either positive or negative. There were no line edits."

If we can have a conversation with students about the purpose of workshops and what they hope to get from them, we can give them more agency in the process. Because there are so many ways to workshop, we can consider offering participants a menu of choices such as these:
- The Critical Response Process focuses on observations and the writer's process.
- Partner-Led Workshops asks participants to workshop in pairs, perhaps across a series of weeks or a while semester, rather than as a group.
- Workshops can consist of Only Questions, from the workshop or from the writer.
- Only Praise lets writers understand "what isn't working" from what "is".
- We can also consider the Cold Workshop, which is the theatre model for hearing new plays, whereby participants respond to what they hear – without reading the work in advance.

Workshops can also continue to be centred around paper submissions or online spaces. In either form, we can let the writer contextualize their own work by introducing

it, discussing it, or framing questions. Readers can "mark up" work with sticky notes, the "Amy Hempel method" or by highlighting/underlining what strikes them most as well as by adding "likes" and comments to a digital space such as a Padlet. However we are workshopping, when we're together in a room, we can give writers the opportunity to rearrange it, Writers can decide where to site themselves as well as others.

DECOLONISING THE WORKSHOP

While reading *Craft in the Real World* I also learned about my assumptions of "what" it is we're trying to workshop, particularly when offering feedback about whether a piece "works" or not. Salesses reminds us that craft is a series of expectations. If so, do we have a responsibility to teach and feedback on what is "expected" – by readers, agents, editors, gatekeepers – or us? Do we have a responsibility to workshop expectations of craft, particularly if the workshop is about "success" or marketability? Who decides what is effective? Who decides what is good? What is the cultural context of feedback?

What expectations might we have of elements of craft in general? How do we – how should we – workshop other expectations, such as non-Western structures or forms? After all, workshop participants point out weaknesses that they perceive – which are often subjective. What they notice may not be weaknesses at all – they are also expectations of cultural ways of reading.

> *"Defenders of the traditional model claim that decentering the author is a way of prioritizing audience, of talking about the story from a readerly perspective. (Such is often a goal of workshop.) But we need to talk more about power's relationship to audience (as marginalization only increases if it is unacknowledged or unchallenged.) … the workshop isn't necessarily an author's intended audience, a problem compounded by an unreflective use of "the reader" … In other words, even when workshop is at its most effective, its effect is to mirror and implicitly endorse unequal power structures in the real world. Why do we cling to this outdated model?"* (Salesses: 126-127).

The Iowa model aims to keep the writer silent, as the work should be complete on the page without explanation. But what if we are not the writer's intended reader? What if there are things that workshop participants might not understand? Should the writer be asked to explain them in work that their "ideal reader" would know? If writers wish to contextualise their work, should we understand the aims and culture of that work? How can we prioritise any reader while not alienating the writer? How do we keep from making assumptions about how or where the writer wants their work to be read? What are we mirroring and what are we endorsing? How can we — how should we — decolonise feedback?

I asked students about this too with these questions: "Have you ever experienced feedback about your work by someone who did not understand the culture you were discussing? Did you feel able to discuss this difference?" My students acknowledge their own biases, but they are also culturally curious and empathetic, and, as acknowledged earlier, they all struggle with mental health to some degree. Roughly half

have paperwork to manage physical or mental health concerns or neurodivergence. Many said they had benefitted from such feedback:

- "I've changed elements when better understanding is gained."
- "The best feedback I've had is people calling out mistakes I've missed or shared opposing interpretations of my characters and stories – it helps me to write with other points of view, by my own in mind."
- "Yes, I've had a lot of feedback, questioning my need to always include diversity."

Others suggested that the differences between workshops participants were maybe not cultural, "but other issues such as historical issues about sexuality." Another said, "I think it is hard to write for other cultures or races if you are outside of it yourself and you don't want to seem insensitive by not writing about it." Even in a relatively homogenous group of writers, there is a desire to look outward, to write about larger experiences than their own through characters whose lived experiences do not match theirs by gender, race, or species.

Of course, this opens the conversation of cultural appropriation, which we have through the continuing process of decolonizing the curriculum. To the question "Do you have any advice for writing about people who do not look like you?" Alexander Chee in "How to Unlearn Everything" (2019) has great advice:

> "Increasingly, this question is a trick question. A part of a game where writers of color, LGBTQ writers, women writers, are told to write as white men in order to succeed, and thus are set up to fail. While white men are allowed to write what they think the stories of these people are, and are told it is their right. This game is over" (Vulture).

How can we know how we are setting up our students to succeed or fail if we don't ask them about their own expectations or the feedback they receive? If we're hoping to train students to become working writers, do we continue to reinforce the market by offering feedback in the context of our cultural expectations, or should we work to challenge it? Salesses stresses that "craft should not live in a vacuum – it should sit within its cultural and historical context. Race, gender, sexuality etc. affect our lives and so must affect our fiction. Real-world context, and particularly what we do with that context is craft" (xiii).

Despite the challenges, I believe in the workshop process. And I believe in compassion. I believe that both should work together.

> "I believe in workshop as a shared act of imagination, in the ability of many minds to foster the growth of one by one through conversation. I believe in the vulnerability of process and the process of vulnerability. But if we are to use workshop as a pedagogical approach, we need to actively acknowledge and confront the dangers of workshop both to the writing itself – and to our personhoods" (Salesses: 128-129).

These are tough times for universities, for the humanities, for writers, for creative beings, for humans. But we mustn't give up. We must continue to invest in good practice

and the slow development of skills, abilities, and insights while also being aware that we all experience our own sets of expectations, biases, discomforts and fears. None of us are one-size-fits all. If we want to workshop well with writers, we can work harder to ensure that the process truly serves them.

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