



## Reimagining Workshop

Recognizing and Expanding the Role of Reading

*Michael Bunn*

Writing workshop has been a staple in both creative writing and composition classrooms for decades, and countless instructors view it as a productive way to get students to engage with and learn about writing. The common element in nearly every scholarly articulation of workshop's benefits is a focus on its usefulness in helping participants improve their writing. Tim Mayers claims that, "at its best, the writing workshop model can provide aspiring writers with insights about their own writing that would have taken a long time, and perhaps much wasted effort, to realize otherwise" (2010: 96). Anna Leahy suggests that workshop is "a methodology that allows students to learn and deeply understand the theories behind and practices of writing process" (2010: 65). Joseph Harris asserts that the fundamental purpose of workshop "is to help [participants] revise and improve their writing" (2010: 146).

What rarely gets discussed, however, is the important role that reading plays in workshop. This lack of discussion makes sense given that few people seem to realize how essential reading is to the entire process. In his article "Small Worlds: What Works in Workshops If and When They Do?" Philip Gross notes that "it can come as a surprise to learner-writers to learn that *a workshop is as much a reading as a writing group*" (2010: 55). Even the common name "writing workshop" veils the fact that it involves just as much reading as it does writing. Paul Dawson points out that although "the pedagogical practice of the workshop is fundamentally one of critical reading," few people recognize this (2005: 88). Dawson argues that "because it is

seen as a writing workshop, the critical principles which underpin and allow discussion (reading) tend to remain invisible and undertheorized” (88). The fact that these workshops take place almost exclusively in courses dedicated to writing—whether composition or creative writing—further obscures the important role of reading.

In the field of composition studies the role of reading in writing courses has been a scholarly topic since at least the 1980s, and there has been a recent surge of composition scholarship dealing with reading (Horning 2007; Jolliffe and Harl 2008; Bunn 2011; Salvatori and Donahue 2012; Carillo 2015). To date, however, none of this scholarship focuses specifically on the writing workshop and the way(s) that reading underpins this pedagogical practice. And while the field of creative writing has far more to say about workshop—including the relatively recent anthology *Does the Writing Workshop Still Work?* (Donnelly 2010)—specific attention to the reading that takes place in workshop remains largely neglected.

This article is an attempt to illuminate some of the ways that reading serves as a foundation for workshops in both composition and creative writing courses. The truth is that we do our students a disservice—and limit the potential effectiveness of workshops—when we do not think carefully about reading. In many collegiate writing classes workshops are too narrowly focused: the primary goals of these workshops are to improve the specific text under consideration, and perhaps to learn something about the writing process. While productive, this version focuses solely on writing, and little attention is given to how the reading that makes workshop possible can also be invaluable in learning how to write. Students receive virtually no instruction on how to most effectively read for workshop.

The reimagined workshop I advocate in this article is one in which students understand that a major goal of the workshop is to develop their ability to read, and it is a chance for students in both composition and creative writing classes to develop their reading skills in ways that can improve their writing.<sup>1</sup> It is a space where students workshop both student and published texts. This unconventional workshop is based largely on ideas I formulated while conducting research at the University of Michigan to examine some of the ways that writing instructors theorize and teach reading in college composition courses. One major element of this research was to investigate how instructors conceive of and utilize workshops. In particular, I was interested to see if instructors thought of workshop as a productive way to teach reading and the extent to which they used workshop to teach reading-writing connections.

As part of this research, an online survey was sent to instructors who were teaching or had taught first-year writing at the university, presenting them with a series of questions about the ways they theorize and teach reading. In total, 114 instructors were invited to complete the online survey; these instructors were all graduate students or lecturers teaching for the English Department Writing Program during the semester of data collection, and each of these instructors had taught at least one section of first-year writing in the past or were doing so at the time of the survey. The response rate was exactly 50 percent—57 of the 114 invited instructors completed the online survey.

Next, interviews were conducted with eight instructors who were teaching first-year writing at the time of the interview and who indicated on their survey that they would be willing to speak with me. Five of the interviewees were graduate student instructors (two studying literature, two studying English and education, and one studying linguistics) and three were full-time faculty lecturers (who had all earned MFA degrees in creative writing from the university). After these interviews, I observed four of these interviewed instructors' classrooms on two separate occasions to see firsthand some of the ways that instructors were (and were not) teaching reading and/or using workshop.

During coding and analysis of the instructor surveys and interviews, I found that *workshop* was mentioned repeatedly—especially in conjunction with student writing (though rarely in connection with published writing). This article discusses the two main goals that instructors at Michigan revealed for workshopping in first-year writing—cooperative learning among students and helping students improve their writing—and explains how both of these goals depend upon student reading. Next, I propose several of the possible benefits of expanding workshop to include published texts—a practice that helps students to further develop their reading skills and understand that all writing can benefit from revision. I go on to explain why instructors should teach students a particular way of reading for workshop: reading like a writer. The article concludes by revealing how asking students to read published and student-produced texts in different ways can inadvertently devalue student writing and limit the effectiveness of workshop. Together, these sections make clear that successful workshops absolutely depend on reading, and also offer some initial suggestions for what and how students should read for workshops.

### Reading as the Foundation of Workshop

It is helpful to have a clear sense of what workshop is and how it is most commonly used in order to better understand how heavily it relies on reading. In “Materializing the Sublime Reader” (2001), Chris Green describes the typical workshop format:

Copies of student work are passed out to the class at the end of one class period and are commented upon the next. Generally, the class is spliced equally so the group as a whole may give roughly equal time to all the work submitted, and students are also encouraged to respond both verbally and in writing. Their commentary for exploring revision is guided by some established craft jargon useful for helping students go beyond basic writing difficulties. (157)

Though the organization of writing workshops varies from course to course, the main element is that members of the group read and critique one another’s writing (as opposed to published texts). Most workshops, especially in creative writing, employ a “gag rule” in which the author remains silent until the very end of the discussion.<sup>2</sup> Two very common arrangements are the whole-class workshop facilitated by the instructor in which every student in the course reads and comments on *one* particular text in a large, communal discussion, and the small-group workshop in which students form smaller groups to manage their own critiques and share their work.

While I had not asked any questions specifically about workshop in the instructor survey, I quickly realized during my initial analysis that the survey responses had many references to workshop. Thirty-three different survey responses mention *workshop*, despite not a single question about workshop being on the survey.<sup>3</sup> As a result, I made it a point to ask about workshop in each of the interviews. All eight of the interviewees report spending time in class workshopping. Two main goals for workshop emerged during these conversations, both of which depend on student reading to be successful: cooperative learning among students and helping students improve their own writing.

The first major purpose of workshop put forth by interviewees involves cooperative learning among students and the development of a sense of community through workshopping. Educational researchers Suzanne Wade and Elizabeth Moje write that “studies have demonstrated that encouraging students to generate and respond to one another’s texts contributes to enhanced content learning and positive growth by helping students learn social skills necessary for communication, cooperation, and collaboration”

(2000: 619). It makes sense that instructors would emphasize the communal, social benefits of workshop: the writing course becomes a place for students to have their views acknowledged, respected, and responded to by their peers. Through this process students develop a sense of collegiality—perhaps even a sense of community.

Sally is one of the interviewees to address how this sense of collegiality can be valuable for students:<sup>4</sup>

I think back to my college experience, and the friendships that I've developed that were safe enough that I could go to someone and say, "Can you read this?" And my hope, and I've shared this with them, is that they'll make some connections in this class that will last beyond the term and that when they have a paper and they're struggling in the future, that they have someone to go to as a result of workshop with each other.

Sally's own collegiate experience of developing a network of potential readers proved useful to her, and she intends for workshop to help her students develop these same types of relationships. The workshop that Sally strives for is one in which participants feel "safe" enough to share and read one another's work long after the class is over.

Another instructor, Sharon, also discusses the cooperative aspects of workshop in her interview and notes how it can help students to improve their writing:

**MB:** *What are you hoping that the workshop accomplishes?*

**Sharon:** Well, I hope they learn from each other. That's my goal. I hope they're able to recognize where they can improve their own writing and just be sensitive to different ways of writing, different styles of writing.

Later in the interview she adds: "There are some students who have learned from each other, because I had one student, she was like, 'You know, after I saw what my peers wrote, I went back and totally revamped my essay.'"

Tawnya, a third instructor, makes a similar comment about the benefits of students reading one another's writing:

I think, first of all, just the idea of reading your peers' work, it can both make you feel better in the sense that, "Oh, they're having the same problems as me," but it can also make you kind of kick it up a notch. Like my first two students whose papers were workshopped are two of my really strong writers. . . . I sort of got the sense that the other students were reading these drafts going, "Oh, this is really good. Like I

need to kick it up,” so I think there is that kind of saying, “Okay, here’s what your peers can do. You can do this too.”

Both Sharon’s and Tawnya’s desire for students to learn from one another is predicated on the understanding that they will read one another’s writing and *respond* based on what they noticed and reacted to while reading. They will respond by providing feedback on the text being workshopped, but also by continuing to revise their own writing. As Tawnya mentions, students will sometimes read their classmates’ writing for workshop, see that it is high-caliber work, and strive to reach that same level themselves. While it is obvious that students’ abilities to provide useful feedback to their peers depend on their actually having *read* the assigned text—a point that underscores how essential reading is to workshop—what Sharon and Tawnya describe is having the students read the text in terms of how it was composed, not just in terms of the content.

This touches upon the second major purpose put forth by interviewees: the reading done for workshop is intended to help students improve their own writing. Another instructor, Mason, mentions the potential reading-writing connections established in workshop: “The hope is that they will transfer those critical reading skills over to their own writing, and the bridge . . . the *workshop* is that bridge. So by critically reading other people’s writing, they first of all see how other people handled the assignment and maybe can go back and look at their own piece with fresh eyes.” During the interview Mason elaborates on why it is valuable for students to practice and develop this kind of reading during workshop:

**Mason:** You know they don’t really understand how a piece of writing is sort of crafted and organized and put together. They understand content . . . but they don’t really understand the choices that a writer makes and how those choices affect the overall impact of a piece.

**MB:** *Is it fair to say that when you use “critical reading,” you’re talking about the ways that choices are made and texts are composed to have certain stylistic effects, certain effects on readers, that type of thing?*

**Mason:** Absolutely. . . . I think I’ve been using this term a lot—the *choices* that a writer makes when putting together a piece . . . the sort of rule-of-thumb, layman’s way of talking about it—and I use this in the classroom, too—is the choices that a writer is making in order to communicate.

The reading students do for workshop is intended to help them understand the kinds of choices that writers make while composing. What Mason is describing here as “critical reading” is nearly identical to what I call Reading Like a Writer (RLW); later in the article I explain why it is such an effective reading approach to promote in combination with workshop.

When I asked Sharon whether she tries to teach students a particular way of reading, she said no, nothing beyond introducing the “concepts” of “the argumentative essay” and “structure.” There is no question, however, that she has particular reading-related goals when it comes to workshop. Sharon hopes that assigning students to read their classmates’ work in workshop can “inform” their own writing by exposing them to “different varieties of writing”:

**Sharon:** I’m hoping that they, too, can learn, at least from seeing others’ writing, maybe a different approach to different things.

**MB:** *It sounds like, in your response to your goals for the workshop, that in the workshop itself, you see a connection between the reading of peer work and the students’ own writing. . . .*

**Sharon:** [I] really think by having them exposed to different varieties of writing, that it’ll inform them, in terms of their own writing, in other words, what not to do and what to do.

Sharon goes on to mention that reading a variety of different things helped her own writing “tremendously,” and she expresses doubt about whether students do a lot of “personal reading of their own.” Given this perceived lack of personal reading, she sees workshop as a crucial opportunity for students to read and be exposed to different styles.

Workshop as it is being imagined and employed by these four instructors allows students to see themselves as contributing members in a community of writers. Reading texts for workshop provides a level of excellence to strive for and exposes students to an array of writing styles and different ways to go about addressing a prompt. While they read, respond, and discuss texts for class, they are learning to examine and critique texts using a lens that can (and hopefully will) be turned upon their own writing. Workshop can serve as a “bridge” to connect the two distinct (but related) processes of reading and writing. Establishing these connections between reading and writing can be an important step in helping students to improve their writing (see Bunn 2013; see also Tara Lockhart and Mary Soliday’s article in this issue).

Yet, as noted in my introduction, the central role of reading in workshop is rarely discussed in either composition studies or creative writing scholarship. Failing to address the role of reading in workshop means missing out on a valuable opportunity to better understand what takes place in many composition and creative writing classrooms and to improve our pedagogy based on this enhanced understanding. Instead, we are left with a partially developed, fuzzy picture of how both student reading and workshop operate. As a practice utterly dependent on reading, workshop is a particularly important site to research and theorize in terms of reading.

### **Workshopping Published Texts**

Generating a scholarly focus on the crucial role that reading plays in workshop is the first step toward addressing a number of other related issues. One such issue concerns the types of texts that students should read in workshop. I propose a fairly dramatic change in regard to the types of texts being read in both composition and creative writing workshops. I encourage instructors to assign students to workshop published texts in addition to student writing. I realize that it is already common practice to read and discuss published texts in college writing classes, but I am talking about implementing fully structured *workshops* of published texts. My suggestion to workshop published texts is related to the notion of student authority and, specifically, to how students derive authority in the workshop setting.

In his *New Yorker* article on writing workshops, Louis Menand comments that workshops are based on “the theory that students who have never published a poem can teach other students who have never published a poem how to write a publishable poem” (2009: 106). Menand’s assertion questions whether students in workshop—most of whom have never published themselves—are in an authoritative position from which to offer useful suggestions. Yet, as evidenced by the success of countless workshops, students *do* maintain authority in workshops: it is their extensive experience as readers of various kinds of texts that prepares them to comment usefully on writing. Whether or not they have ever had their own writing published, college students have been reading, interpreting, and evaluating texts for years—especially published texts.

This means that the authority they derive in the workshop is based on their skills as *readers*, and it can be particularly empowering for students to critique published authors during workshop. By offering proposed changes to published texts, students are prompted to draw upon their expertise as readers to assess the work of established writers who may otherwise

appear beyond critique. Published writing is not perfect, and students begin to understand that even the work of successful, published writers can be improved upon. They learn that *all* writing can be revised.

I realize that workshopping published texts in class would be a dramatic shift from the usual focus on student-produced writing, but a dramatic shift is exactly what some scholars are calling for. In their recent *Pedagogy* article on graduate-level creative writing workshops, Becky Adnot-Haynes and Tessa Mellas remark that “because so many instructors fail to stray from a standard workshop script, their workshops do not make full use of the intellectual community they create” (2012: 299). Colin Irvine suggests that instructors need to “mix it up” when it comes to workshop to avoid stale routines where students “mindlessly go through the motions as readers and writers” (2010: 143). Stephanie Vanderslice argues that instructors need to “continually inscrib[e] and revis[e] the essential elements that contribute to the success of the workshop” to ensure they are serving students well (2006: 151).

But why actually workshop published texts instead of just discussing them in class? Collectively workshopping published texts—as opposed to simply assigning students to read published texts on their own—puts a specific structure in place for students to discuss what could still be improved upon in the writing. While students are accustomed to offering suggestions for revision during workshop, offering suggestions for improvement is rarely a part of class-wide discussions of published texts. If instructors conduct actual workshops of published texts, the class can engage with revision in a way that simply does not happen during most discussions of published writing. Taking apart a published text in workshop is different from discussing that text in class because the very process of workshopping implies that the student is *supposed* to critique the writing. This is crucial. One by-product of instructors usually (if not exclusively) selecting the texts to be read for class is that students know the texts have been selected for some reason. Drawing on all their previous school experiences, students know that published texts are almost always selected because they are “good.” (They are often the work of famous authors the students are expected to know and/or revere.) Thus, at least to some degree, a positive value is applied to nearly every published text that an instructor selects based on that very act of selection, which puts students in a potentially awkward position: to critique the text may feel like critiquing the instructor’s judgment and taste. If instructors assign a published text for workshop, however, students understand that they are expected to critique the text.

During my research I had the opportunity to talk with and observe

an instructor who workshops published texts in class. During our interview Lorrie explains how those workshops became an opportunity for class-wide revision of published texts:

**Lorrie:** The exercise that we did as a class . . . was actually taking in a couple of paragraphs from one of the things that we had read that day and looking at all of the pronouns that they had used. There were several that the students thought didn't kind of obey the patterns that would have been most clear, so we rewrote that together, as a class. We rewrote the paragraphs.

**MB:** *Actually took the published writing and reformulated it.*

**Lorrie:** Yeah, exactly.

**MB:** *Is that something that you have done more than once or was that sort of a one-time thing?*

**Lorrie:** Yeah. We've done it a few times with different topics. . . .

**MB:** . . . *[H]ow do you feel like that goes in the class, this sort of rewriting as a class?*

**Lorrie:** I feel like it's *fun*. I mean, I think that they like it. . . . [S]omeone can object to a change that someone else wants to make, and they kind of have a space for negotiating what sounds best, which gives us a chance to talk about why. . . . I really like the idea of using things that are published and that seem to be static in talking about how we can make them into something different, which is what writing is all about.

During one of my classroom observations, I had a chance to see Lorrie's class work collaboratively to revise lines from one of the published texts they had been assigned. Lorrie used a computer to project the first page of one of the readings. She then asked the students to pick a sentence from the reading that could be revised. She then opened up a new screen on the computer and moved that sentence into a word processing program. Throughout the activity Lorrie would solicit suggested changes from students and make those changes in the word processing document projected on the screen, and then the class would discuss whether the changes were an improvement or made the sentence worse. Though this workshop differed somewhat from the workshop of student-produced texts that I observed in her class due to its strict focus on sentence-level writing issues, her students were highly engaged in imagining how the published text could have been different and in proposing suggestions for revision.

Lorrie used these workshops of published texts at various times throughout the semester, interchanging them with more conventional workshops of student writing. It is not hard to imagine Lorrie, or any other instructor, experimenting with different formats for these workshops, including assigning a published text for either a whole class or small group workshop. There is really no reason that a workshop of published texts could not be nearly identical to how the class operates workshops of student-produced texts (with the notable exception of the author not being present in the room).

Despite the potential benefits of workshoping published texts, this practice is not widespread. I found little evidence either in my research data or in scholarship of published texts being workshoped in composition or creative writing classes.<sup>5</sup> Only three of the fifty-seven instructor participants mention assigning published texts to be workshoped in class,<sup>6</sup> and there appears to be a strong conviction that student-produced texts are better suited for workshop than published texts. In response to the survey question, are there any classroom activities or assignments that are better suited to use one type of text as opposed to the other—either published writing or student-produced writing?, numerous instructors suggest that workshoping is more effective (or only effective) when used with student-produced writing.<sup>7</sup> Here are three survey responses that attest to this point:

- Workshoping works better for student produced b/c it is in process.
- Workshops work better with the student-produced writing because they're usually quite engaged during workshops and more able/willing to apply the discussion to their writing.
- I don't know what the point of workshoping a published piece of writing would be.

As two of these instructors note, there are some seemingly good reasons to limit workshop to the discussion of student-produced texts. The argument can also be made that assigning student-produced texts places a priority on student writing and valorizes student work in a way that is rare within the academy. In *Terms of Work for Composition* (2000), Bruce Horner writes, “The institution’s role in the production of student writing and the circumscriptions academic institutions typically impose on the circulation of student texts guarantee the low value of student writing in relation to other writing” (50). Using student texts during workshop helps reduce this devaluing of student writing by making it the focus of serious classroom attention. By sharing their writing with a classroom of peers, students break

out of the normal education cycle where their work is produced for, and read by, the instructor and no one else. Workshop brings student writing in front of a live audience.

The argument can also be made that students learn more from workshopping one another's work because their writing is usually less polished than published writing—the types of mistakes located in student texts are more representative of the kinds of mistakes that student writers make. As one instructor wrote in a survey response, “Sample student papers are suited for helping students learn to critique each other's writing more than published texts. The kinds of writing issues they're looking for in peer papers are naturally more similar (i.e. elementary).”

Let me be clear: I'm not questioning the value of using student-produced writing in workshop. What I *am* questioning is whether a sole focus on student-produced texts might have several unintended and harmful consequences: (a) presenting published writing as static, fixed, and beyond student critique; (b) implying that student-produced texts are of lower value since they alone need to be workshopped; and (c) reinforcing the idea that the two types of writing are essentially different things (more on this in the final section). Though instructors might be concerned that to add workshops of published texts to an already crowded curriculum will require cutting other important material, it would likely take only a few workshops of published texts before students start to realize that *both* published and student writing can be critiqued and revised.

### Teaching Students to Read for Workshop

One challenge for instructors is to help students to read for workshop in ways that benefit their writing. In *Reading like a Writer* (2006), novelist Francine Prose discusses her growing awareness that most students do not know how to do this. Prose responded by changing her pedagogy. Instead of “attempts to talk about how it *felt* to read Borges or Poe,” she “organized classes around the more pedestrian, halting method of beginning at the beginning, lingering over every word, every phrase, every image, considering how it enhanced and contributed to the story as a whole” (11).

In the type of workshop I'm proposing here, students are taught to read like a writer so that they can take apart both published and student-produced texts. I define my own conception of RLW as “work[ing] to identify some of the choices the author made so that you can better understand how such choices might arise in your own writing. The idea is to carefully examine the things you read, looking at the writerly techniques in the text in order

to decide if you might want to adopt similar (or the same) techniques in your writing” (Bunn 2011: 73). Students are encouraged to try “to understand how the piece of writing was put together by the author and what you can learn about writing by reading in this way. As you read, you think about how the choices the author made and the techniques that he/she uses are influencing your own responses as a reader. What is it about the way that it’s written that makes you feel and respond the way you do?” (72).<sup>8</sup> Students trace their own reactions—both positive and negative—to particular elements in the writing. Their comments in workshop evolve beyond “it was good” or “this isn’t really working” as they identify the specific elements that are making it good or that keep the writing from being successful. Further, by thinking about how their own reactions as readers of the assigned text have been partially determined by the author’s choices, students start to understand how the choices that *they* make in their writing might similarly influence their readers.

RLW is a natural fit with workshop because it helps students to understand and identify how the text under consideration was composed, locate what is currently successful in the writing, and determine what could still be improved upon. Students formulate ideas about how the workshopped text could be revised while simultaneously identifying specific writing techniques or strategies that they might want to use (or avoid) in their own work. And because the discussion of what they uncovered while reading takes place in a workshop, students can share and compare what they found with their classmates and then work collaboratively to propose revisions to the text.

### **Promoting a Uniform Approach**

For RLW to be successful in workshop, it is essential that students be prompted to identify both what *is* and *is not* working in the text. They need to be able to determine which aspects of the texts are fueling their responses, whether positive or negative. To really understand how the text is composed—to speak insightfully about a piece of published writing or to offer their classmates useful feedback—students must recognize both which attributes of the text they find effective and which they think warrant revision. This means that regardless of whether they are reading published or student-produced texts, students need to be reading each text in the same way(s). For some instructors this will mean changing their current practice.

Though there was an even split among the eight interviewees as to whether they ask students to read published and student-produced texts in the same way, this evenness was not reflected in the survey data. One survey question asked, are there any differences between the ways that you ask

students to read the writing produced by their classmates and the ways you ask them to read published texts?<sup>9</sup> Thirty-three instructors responded yes, and only seventeen responded no (another seven were unsure or addressed related topics without providing a clear answer). Just under two-thirds of all the surveyed instructors report that they do encourage students to read the two types of texts in different ways.

One of the most common reasons given for why these instructors ask students to read the two types of texts differently is that student-produced writing is explicitly unfinished and open to revision. Workshop is based on the premise that writing should be revised and that obtaining feedback from readers can help. Workshop participants enter into a tacit agreement that they will read and comment on one another's work, as long as the attention and effort are reciprocated. Short of coming to the workshop in person, published authors have no way of holding up their end of this bargain. One instructor put it quite succinctly: "When we critique published texts, the comments stay in the room and are never actualized. But, when we give feedback on student texts, we can see the changes that result from our comments/suggestions/readings."

This instructor's comment is steeped in a belief that the primary goal of workshop is to help the author improve the specific texts under consideration. Instead, we should conceive of workshop primarily as a space for all students to learn about the processes of reading and writing. And as I observed in Lorrie's classroom, there are ways in which published texts can be revised with multiple students playing a key role in those revisions (even if the original author never participates).

During our interview one instructor, Don, brought up another reason that he asks students to read the two types of texts differently; he sees student-produced writing as fundamentally different from published writing: "I feel that the conversations we had about professional text are not that useful in discussing the student papers, because we're—it is—it is a different species of thing. I used to think it would be sort of a fledgling version of this paper, but it's actually *different*. It has a different structure, has different problems." Don bases his explanation for asking students to read the two types of texts differently on his belief that student-produced writing is more error-prone than published texts: "The biggest difference is with the professional papers, we are observing what's *right*, and in the student papers, so little is right that we can't really do that. We are always like—looking to see what's wrong, and so they become different conversations. So I guess maybe some of the skills that they learned reading the professional papers don't transfer over because we're having a different conversation."

On one level, Don's assertion that published and student-produced writing are fundamentally different resonates with many instructors' experiences in the classroom. Student writers often struggle with sentence-level issues and make grammatical mistakes rarely found in published writing. Published texts often display structural techniques instructors could hardly imagine their most skilled students using. Student-produced texts come as bunches of stapled papers or as e-mail attachments, whereas published writing arrives in books, in glossy magazines, or on professionally designed websites. Yet, while, undoubtedly, certain writing characteristics (and yes, patterns of error) are more commonly found in student-produced writing, there are always examples—the incredibly insightful student essay or the impenetrably dense published article—that help us to recognize that published and student-produced texts are not actually different “species.”

Perhaps published and student-produced texts appear to be different in part because instructors already perceive them to be different. In “The Phenomenology of Error” (1981) Joseph M. Williams recounts his surprise at finding errors in the published writing of several authors considered experts on grammar and English usage (including E. B. White and H. W. Fowler). Williams tried to determine why these errors—or in some cases direct contradictions of grammatical rules prescribed by the author elsewhere—went unnoticed or uncommented upon by the author or by an editor. Why were readers not reacting negatively to the errors in these published texts? Williams concludes that, “if we read any text the way we read freshman essays, we will find many of the same kinds of errors we routinely expect to find and therefore do find. But if we could read those student essays unreflexively, if we could make the ordinary kind of contract with those texts that we make with other kinds of texts, then we could find many fewer errors” (159). If Williams is correct, some of the differences we recognize between published and student-produced writing—at least in terms of error—are predetermined by an *assumption* of difference. As a result, we read the texts differently, which only reinforces our initial perception that the two types of texts are different. And the cycle continues.

These perceptions of difference are further reinforced when we ask students to read the two types of texts differently. Perhaps we, like Don, prompt students to read for “what’s *right*” in published texts without asking them to do the same thing with their classmates’ writing. Perhaps we are not encouraging students to be as critical of published writing as we are when we make suggestions for improvement and ideas for revision two major emphases of reading student writing.

In fact, several instructors specifically mention asking students to be *less* critical of published texts. Here are five such survey responses:

- For published essays . . . we're talking about what's really effective in the piece and focused less on criticism.
- For published texts, we tend to focus on what's working well and spend less time with criticism.
- Sometimes when I ask students to read their classmates' work, I am asking them to provide feedback in a structured workshop. . . . In contrast, I don't usually have students provide feedback to published texts or, come to think of it, critique them too much.
- (I don't like to admit this). We are more critical of student writing, spending more time discussing what a student might do differently to improve their writing. We are more neutral (or even more positive) with respect to choices that other writers make.
- We're more critical of the student writing, which I'm not sure is a good thing. I take a workshop approach with student writing. I'm less focused on the flaws of the published writing.

Note how these last two instructors seem hesitant in their survey responses, as if wondering whether asking students to be extra critical of student-produced writing is a mistake. In fact, it is a mistake. Asking students to read the two kinds of texts differently—especially prompting them to observe what is working well in published texts without noting the flaws and/or possible areas for improvement—sends the message that published writing is inherently better and more valuable than student writing: published texts are where students learn what to do in their writing, whereas student-produced texts are too flawed or error ridden to serve as useful models.

This also leads to an impoverished version of the workshop. If students are primarily (if not exclusively) reading student-produced texts in workshop, and reading primarily (if not exclusively) to identify what could be improved upon, then the reading done in workshop automatically becomes an effort to diagnose what is wrong with someone's writing. Workshop is limited to a mechanism for "fixing" texts.

For workshop to reach its full potential, students must be prompted to read both published and student-produced texts for what could be improved upon and what is already working well. Reading Like a Writer allows them to speak insightfully about both types of texts and offer productive feedback toward revision. When students identify the writerly techniques and choices they responded to while reading, and share their insights with their

classmates, workshop becomes an opportunity for every student to learn about both reading and writing. This kind of workshop is less a space for a specific student to improve a specific text and more an opportunity for communal learning. Students who participate in such a workshop are exposed to a variety of different styles of writing and may become motivated to “kick it up a notch” and revise in response to what they have read. They are still developing bonds with their classmates and providing helpful feedback, but the learning goes well beyond a specific text, student author, or individual workshop. And this learning is a direct result of their *reading*.

### Notes

1. Mayers asserts that the “writing workshop model often operates quite differently in composition classes than it does in creative writing classes” primarily because students in composition courses are perceived as “students deficient (or at least insufficiently experienced) in writing,” whereas creative writing courses are viewed as courses for “students already proficient (at least to some extent) in writing” (2010: 94). Even if this is true (which I am not entirely convinced of), the kind of reimagined workshop I advocate can help both novice and more advanced students to improve their reading and writing.
2. For a scathing critique of creative writing workshops in general, and of the gag rule in particular, see Kearns 2009.
3. Workshop was a required component of teaching first-year writing at the University of Michigan and was discussed at length during new teacher orientation, which at least partially explains the abundance of references to workshop in the data.
4. All instructor names are pseudonyms.
5. One notable exception is Katherine Haake, who assigns students to read both published and student writing in her creative writing workshop. Haake hopes that by submitting published stories along with their own writing students will learn that writing “takes place in the highly particular context of all other writing, a conversation” (2000: 106). She explains that participants in the workshop “were not to make distinctions of value between the novice and the published work, but were instead to attempt to discover and articulate what held all three texts together” (107).
6. In addition to Lorrie, both Mason and Sally mention workshoping published texts. Mason’s class only does so once, at the beginning of the semester, primarily to learn how “workshop should function.” It is unclear from his comments if the workshop serves as an opportunity to critique the published text and imagine potential revisions. Sally emphasized that the class did not use their normal workshop procedure while workshoping published texts and that they probably should have.
7. Only two instructors offer a counterperspective.
8. Notice how similar this is to Mason’s desire for students to read in ways that help them understand “the *choices* that a writer makes when putting together a piece.”

9. This question asked not about the reading done exclusively for workshops but about reading done in the first-year writing course more generally.

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