“Implementing the Student-Centered Creative Writing Workshop Model in Remote Learning Classroom Environments” Outline

SLIDE 1: INTRODUCTION

Hi everyone. My name is Zoë Bossiere, and I’m a doctoral candidate at Ohio University. I study creative writing and rhetoric & composition and I am here today to talk about the student-centered alternative I’ve been developing to the traditional “Iowa” creative writing workshop model in the context of remote learning classroom environments, which many of us have been teaching and learning in since March of this year.

First, I’ll provide a quick introduction of the student-centered creative writing workshop model, both what it is and how it works. Then, I’ll move into a discussion about my experiences teaching an online workshop last semester, when my face to face intro to nonfiction section became an online class and how the student-centered model functioned in that space. My hope is that these insights might be of use to those teaching creative writing workshops online, whether during or after the pandemic.

SLIDE 2: A STUDENT-CENTERED APPROACH (A REVIEW)

The student-centered workshop model is a process of collaborating with students to create a peer feedback system that is tailored to the unique individuals in a given classroom community. It’s based on principles from Peter Elbow’s Writing Without Teachers and Janelle Adsit’s Toward an Inclusive Creative Writing.

A student-centered approach in the context of the creative writing workshop...

First, acknowledges students as specific individuals with unique subject-positions, needs, and goals. The approach is a pedagogy in the spirit of adapting the learning environment to meet students where they are rather than applying a one-model-fits-all approach.

Second, a student-centered approach understands there is no “universal” or “perfect” workshop model. That is, no predetermined model on its own can account for the needs of every individual student in a given class. A student-centered approach must be informed by the students, themselves.

Third, a student-centered approach works to dismantle traditional dynamics of power between teacher and student. In most workshops, the teacher decides, before ever meeting their students, how the workshop will be organized and what its rules will be. A student-centered approach instead asks students directly what they need to be successful in the workshop space.

Fourth, a student-centered approach empowers students to voice their needs, especially students of color, femme- and queer-identifying students, and others whose voices have been traditionally marginalized in the workshop space.
5. Finally, a student-centered approach listens to student needs first, and creates the workshop and learning environment accordingly, through a guided collaborative process, which I will outline and describe in the next slide.

SLIDE 3: 4 STEPS TO A STUDENT-LED WORKSHOP

To help teachers put this idea into practice, I’ve developed a simple 4-step strategy for facilitating the development of a student-centered workshop in creative writing classes.

**Step 1 is Read:** Assign students essays about systemic issues with the traditional “Iowa” workshop model and the writing world. For students who have encountered these problems firsthand, these works will provide them the agency and vocabulary to name past experiences. For students who have not encountered these issues, the readings will provide necessary context for the workshop creation process.

**Step 2 is Discuss:** As a class, discuss the **structural** (or the systemic and big picture) problems with the workshop in addition to the more **immediate** (or anecdotal) issues that students have witnessed or encountered. For this last one, students may be eager share their bad workshop stories or other frustrations. All of these perspectives offer opportunities for teacher learning what their classroom, as a community, values most.

**Step 3 is to Collaborate** with students on a custom model that works best for the writers in your class. Provide space for students to voice their suggestions, questions, concerns, and hopes for the workshop. Then, draft a copy of the model and give students class time to review it before putting it into practice.

**Step 4 is to Check In:** Once you’ve put your workshop model into practice, check in with students periodically to see how it’s going. Don’t be afraid to make adjustments if there are elements that aren’t working, or to make accommodations for individual students as needed.

SLIDE 4: TRANSITIONING FROM F2F TO ONLINE

In March of 2020, I was preparing to go through these four steps in my intro to creative nonfiction section for our workshop unit. I’d planned some readings about the workshop into the syllabus and I was about to assign them to students when our institution went totally online. At first, our institution said remote classes would be held for a week, which then became the remainder of the semester. My students and I found ourselves suddenly all online in what had originally been a face to face class, which raised a variety of concerns about how best to proceed with our workshop.

As a teacher, my primary concerns were:
- First: How to adapt my face to face lesson plans to an online format
- Second: How to clearly communicate our institution’s COVID-19 course protocols, many of which changed week by week
And third: How best to support students through such a difficult semester

According to feedback from my students around the time our course went online, their top concerns were:

- First: Not having access to a stable internet connection once they returned home from our college campus.
- Second: Privacy. Some students were concerned about having a camera peering into their home during classes, while others didn’t have a quiet or unoccupied space in their homes to attend classes.
- Third: Students were highly anxious about the uncertain state of the world, with information and health guidelines evolving rapidly. Many voiced struggles with their mental health and keeping on top of their classes.
- And fourth: Most heartbreaking, students worried most about the possibility of becoming sick or having to take care of someone who was sick, and falling behind on their coursework.

I wanted to find a way to take all of these concerns—theirs and mine—and develop a classroom environment that would allow them all to be satisfactorily addressed on such short notice.

SLIDE 5: USER-CENTERED DESIGN STRATEGY

As I was planning for the transition from face to face to online I started to do some research into user-centered design, which is a process for creating online platforms—such as websites, smartphone applications, and even virtual classrooms.

In an article in *Computers and Composition* by Jessie Borgman and Jason Dockter called “Considerations of Access and Design in the Online Writing Classroom,” they write: “Diversity recognizes that not all of the population is able bodied and that some require accommodations. Diversity also acknowledges that students learn differently, and have different learning styles/preferences (aural, auditory, visual, spatial, hands on, etc.). The diverse combination of students in an online course requires that instructors design materials that simultaneously cater to multiple learning styles,” (94–95).

In other words...

“Unless choice is given to students, the teacher has unilaterally decided that one specific way of accessing course materials is the best way” (103).

Though Borgman and Dockter are thinking specifically about course design here, I saw some parallels in the way they spoke about embracing the diversity of student learning styles and my efforts to meet the unique needs of the students in my own classroom that semester.

Though I had always wondered whether the student-centered workshop model would be as effective in an online setting as it seemed to be in face to face courses, I didn’t think I would have...
the opportunity to implement it at my institution, which doesn’t offer creative writing courses online during typical semesters. Seeing the similarities between the user-centered design and student-centered model creation process gave me the confidence to try the model in an online setting for the first time.

SLIDE 6 – USER-CENTERED DESIGN PROCESS

This is a chart of what the user-centered design process looks like. You may notice that it shares some traits with the 4-step student-centered workshop model process.

User-centered design begins with analysis and discussion of the problem or situation before moving to the design stage, where a team of creators draft the first iteration of the design. From the design stage, the team evaluates how well they think the design will work, then make any necessary adjustments before implementing it. From feedback gained through the implementation stage, creators can reevaluate the original design and make adjustments through a continual and recursive process.

In my intro to nonfiction workshop, much of the analysis (or “reading” and “discussion”) work took place on Blackboard’s whole class discussion boards. I first asked students to discuss their ideas about a previous small-group mini workshop we’d completed before our class went online. This was to give students an opportunity to think critically about what did and didn’t work for them, as individual writers in the small-group setting.

Then, I assigned students several essays critiquing the traditional creative writing workshop model and asked them to discuss the essays in a second forum. Students learned more about the context of why we were approaching our workshop collaboratively and saw examples of how certain traditional workshop practices can be harmful to writers.

Next, we had a whole class discussion about the parameters of our workshop, such as how we would meet to discuss student submissions, how involved writers should be on their workshop day, and more. Students also completed individual proposals about how the workshop should be structured and function to be inclusive of everyone in our community. This was the “design” or “collaborative” component of the creation process.

Finally, I drafted up a model using students’ ideas about submission guidelines, the format and the rules of the workshop, and other miscellaneous considerations. The draft was posted to Blackboard and students had an opportunity to discuss the pros and cons of different aspects of the model, request adjustments, and provide feedback. Individual students could also express concerns or request specific changes by contacting me privately via email.

After this discussion, we were able to implement our workshop model.

SLIDE 7: PUTTING THE MODEL INTO PRACTICE
Through an exit survey, students commented on how they felt our workshop went, writing:

“[T]he online format ended up being easier and more helpful than I expected. It allowed every student to participate equally, answering key questions posed by both the professor and the student writer.”

“There was definitely a lot more discussion and input from the students on the model than I am used to. Usually [in workshop] it’s just, “read your piece, then we’ll talk about what we liked and what we didn’t.” [We] had a really good lead-up process that incorporated our thoughts and availability as students, which made it truly feel like a whole class workshop.”

“[Our workshop] was more of a round-table discussion of the various pieces, which is always more inclusive and acts as a much better sounding board for an author’s ideas and choices. It was definitely better than the traditional [workshop model].”

While some students noted in the survey that they would have preferred the face to face workshop experience they’d signed up for before the pandemic, all seemed to agree that the model we’d collaborated on worked to suit the individual needs of the writers in our classroom community during this specific semester.

SLIDE 8: WORKSHOP RESULTS

Further, many students seemed to take ownership over and pride in the workshop model, writing:

“I felt that the students were essentially in charge of the workshop model; we were able to discuss what we thought would be most helpful to us and work together to create a workshop that was more about workshopping than criticizing.”

“I feel that students played a role in basically all aspects of creating this workshop. My feedback felt recognized and was included in the workshop plan.”

“I think this workshop was a great demonstration of taking students’ opinions on the workshop model into account. We all offered ideas and methodologies for the workshop approach, suggesting possible ways to handle it, and I think that was represented in the final workshop process.”

Students who participated in our workshop creation process seemed to be invested in the success of the workshop as well as tuned in to the needs of their peers as members of their classroom community. Further, these survey responses illustrate how the student-centered workshop model can be successfully implemented in online classrooms, especially alongside user-centered design pedagogies.
During these wildly uncertain times, and with many creative writing courses taking place online for the foreseeable future, I hope the student-centered workshop model can be used to help creative writing instructors better serve the needs of students in this new era of teaching and learning.

SLIDE 9: QUESTIONS & MORE INFORMATION

Please join us during the Creative Writing Studies Conference on Friday, 10/09/2020 from 1:30–2pm Eastern for an opportunity to chat with me about this presentation.

These slides and a transcript of this recording are publicly available on the Creative Writing Studies Organization website (CWSO).

Again, my name is Zoë Bossiere, I’m a doctoral candidate at Ohio University. You can reach me at my email address (zb240716@ohio.edu) or on Twitter (@zoebossiere).

Thank you so much for your time, and I hope you have a wonderful conference!

FINAL SLIDE (10): WORKS CONSULTED


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