

Turning the Writing Workshop Model on its Head

Strengths-Based Feedback is Crucial for Your Authentic Writer's Voice

by Sue Reynolds

What if I told you there was a magical workshop for writers where, every time you wrote something new—even the roughest, messiest first draft—all the feedback you received would be about the places where your new offering showed craft and promise? Your colleagues would immediately share with you what was vivid and memorable in what you had just written. What's more, their feedback would be sincere.

If you think this sounds like fairy dust and unicorn farts, I understand. But I'm here to tell you it's true—and to tell you where to find this supportive space.

This is the Amherst Writers and Artists Method (AWA), a way of holding workshops with a 40-year history that focuses on developing craft and voice, leading writers from initial experimentation to publication.

More than 1400 leaders have taken the AWA training since it was first developed in Amherst, Massachusetts in the 1990s by Pat Schneider. AWA is now an international organization of writing workshop leaders, mostly based in the United States and Canada, but also in such far-flung places as Turkey, Singapore, Germany, Australia, and Ireland, to name a few.

Many AWA Affiliates work with general populations of writers, both emerging and established. But the organization has a strong social justice history, and many leaders also work with specialized and marginalized populations whose stories don't make it to mainstream

literature often enough: incarcerated people, the homeless, people of colour, First Nations, cancer patients and survivors, caregivers, teenage girls, seniors, domestic abuse and sexual assault survivors, and the bereaved, just to name a few.

There are five essential principles that AWA leaders take to heart when they begin learning this method of facilitation:

1. Everyone has a strong, unique voice.
2. Everyone is born with creative genius.
3. Writing as an art form belongs to all people, regardless of economic class or education level.
4. The teaching of craft can be done without damage to a writer's original voice or artistic self-esteem.
5. A writer is someone who writes.

These principles are supported by six deceptively simple practices that are woven into every AWA experience—they are the net that keeps every workshop both generative *and* safe. And these spaces *are* generative. Every AWA workshop is interactive, with time to get writing done and receive immediate, skilled feedback.

If you're enrolled in writing classes that are more didactic and lecture-based, getting involved in an AWA workshop can support your other coursework by giving you a safe place to experiment.

Safety from criticism is a crucial component in the early stages of creating a piece. Workshops with harsh critiques by colleagues can be devastating. But sometimes our work never even makes it to the critiquing table—our own inner critics are harsher than any MFA

roundtable could be. One of my favourite quotes from my counselling coursework was, “If you treated your friends the way you treat yourself, would you have any?” We are often our own harshest critics—so much so that our pieces languish forever between the covers of our journals. We never give them a second look, having already deemed them too boring, too clichéd, too banal, too derivative to bother with. (Our inner critics are geniuses at knowing the exact right self-judgement to shut us down.)

I want to introduce the AWA method to any writer who is longing for a different kind of workshop experience: one that encourages rather than deflates, and one that focuses on strengths rather than shortcomings. A first draft is rarely ready for publication, but strengths-based feedback can inspire a writer to believe in their piece rather than abandon it. And that belief in the promise of a poem, short story or lyrical essay is essential; otherwise, we will be hard put to devote the hours of attention and development required to craft a polished submission.

I have seen the method galvanize the writing practice of thousands of writers, and I number myself among them. Any time a group of AWA workshop leaders gets together we find ourselves sharing stories about the transformations that happen in our workshops. Anxious beginners, initially too shy to share their work in the group, become confident authors who send their work into the world for publication on a regular basis—and get published. Silenced writers, who have been traumatized by harsh criticism too early in the creative process, believe in their voices once again and the ink flows more freely. And those who have only begun to paddle in the shallows of expression, develop the courage to dive deep into the complexity of being human, bring their treasure back to the surface and lay it on the page.

Despite the title of this post, I know that workshops that offer critiquing can be essential when preparing a piece of writing to go out into the world. The AWA method includes a process for handling manuscript reviews that continues to protect the agency and creative safety of the writer, while uncovering what could make the work stronger. Pat Schneider always said that the way to evaluate working with a group or an editor is, “When you leave that experience do you feel more like writing? Or less?” If the answer is less, you’re in the wrong place. So what if even the critiquing process could make you more eager to write?

If you’re curious to learn more, or to experience the magic, the AWA organization offers a very modestly priced (donation based) monthly write to which anyone is welcome. You can find the offerings on the event calendar at www.amherstwriters.org.

And in April, I’ll be doing an interview on TSNOTYAW with Bianca Marais about the AWA Method. This short introduction is to let you know that it’s coming up, and why you might want to tune in. I promise, I’ll tell you all about the six practices that support the AWA magic then.