

The Business Corner

Teaching with Two Minds

by Denis Ledoux



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As the workshop teacher, you must always experience the session's lifestories with two minds because you are always filling two functions. You are a recipient of the story who is enjoying and being influenced by the story being shared and you are always the teacher whose responsibility is to shape the workshop experience for the group according to a bigger-picture plan.

To appreciate a story and give it appropriate feedback, you must be someone who first of all listens sensitively as a listener who is impacted by the story. One part of you needs to be a non-judgmental listener who allows feelings to be affected by the writing. Only then can you respond with feelings. You are a "subject" of this experience, just like others in the room.

Unfortunately, if that is all you do, you will not be fulfilling your responsibility and promise to help the writer create a more masterful story. After all, that is why s/he has come to be your student and is paying you tuition. So while you must allow yourself to be impacted by the story, you must also always be a bit at an emotional remove so you can respond to it as the piece of writing it is. You must be alert to unexploited elements and lost opportunities in the writing and to possibilities each story suggests for advancing your curriculum.

As I listen to a story in a workshop, I always make note in the margins of reactions I want to share with the reader and of problems that are evident in the text. These problems can be stylistic, psychological, dramatic, etc.

As the workshop discussion proceeds, I must always listen very attentively to what is being said—and not said—by workshopppers as they respond to the piece.

Generally, at first, I withdraw from the discussion and let workshopppers say as much as possible of what needs to be said about a piece of writing. In this way, individuals not only build critiquing skills but they also carry some of the heavy weight of suggesting change—always tinged with a touch of the negative that a teacher can become tainted with. This does not at all mean however that I permit myself the luxury of being passive during discussions. I am always mentally critiquing what is being said, always asking myself if the critique is appropriate, if it has gone far enough, if this is a teachable moment. I ask myself, What has not been said that needs to be said if this manuscript is to be as well-written as it can be?

Not all comments made by workshopppers are equal. Often there is a reluctance to be open. Sometimes a workshoppper will say, "This is a great piece of writing and I wouldn't change a thing!" If this is not true, you must tactfully counter this

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assessment. Generally you can say something like "You were really touched by the message of this story weren't you?" Then you can say, "Sometimes a message resonates for us because we too have lived the experience portrayed, but the same writing does not touch another person. If a piece is really well written it touches us whether or not we have shared the experience. Does anyone feel that that is the case here?"

It is important to remember that the writer needs effective feedback not cheer-leading. Many workshopppers tend to be more comfortable with relationship building than manuscript building. It's the teacher's function to ensure that real community is created by fulfilling the true task of the workshop: to address the writing first and foremost.

There are teachable moments occurring throughout any workshop. These are moments when stopping to consider a specific point can effect everyone's ability to make better writing decisions. A slow beginning paragraph can be the occasion to make an impromptu presentation on qualities of good beginnings, or false statements like "everyone did that in those days" can occasion a discussion of clichés.

Teachable moments are not just contingent on the subject matter being discussed but also on the writer's ability and willingness to be critiqued. Sometimes, if the story has been an especially emotional one, there is a limited amount of literary criticism that can be extended simply because of the personal and sensitive nature of the writing. (Clearly the benefit here of the workshop is psychological rather than literary—nothing wrong with that, by the way.) At other times, the writer her/himself, is not ready to accept any more change or challenge. S/he has arrived at the saturation point of development. Pay attention to that!

If you are fearful or hesitant of exercising leadership during the editing portion of the workshop, your class will hobble along. When Turning Memories® teachers tell me that their workshopppers don't seem to be progressing to quality writing, I ask them about how they handle the editing/critique process. Invariably they say something about not being comfortable pointing out shortcomings in a story—either because they don't always notice them or because they are embarrassed to be naysayers when emotions are concerned. Both of these reactions will undermine your workshop's quality and success.

The most successful of workshop leaders are active directors of writing students. This editing/critique process is at the core of the Turning Memories Into Memoirs workshop. It is the major feature of the teacher training institutes we offer. It is attention to the writing and its effectiveness that distinguish Turning Memories Into Memoirs® Workshops as high quality experiences lifewriters return to time and again because they will be treated seriously and progress in their skills.

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