A Process-Based Writing Workshop: The No Praise/No Blame Method

By Chuck Guilford

This essay describes a writing workshop model that involves students in all phases of the writing process. From prewriting and drafting through revising, students learn to share their writings and to give formative, non-evaluative reader response that helps classmates move forward in their writing process.

This method has evolved gradually for me through years of teaching composition and creative writing classes. In my composition classes, I was looking for ways to improve what were then called, perhaps are still called, "peer editing sessions." I wanted to help students learn to comment more effectively on each other's drafts, and I wanted to get students involved with each other's writing earlier in the writing process. As a result, I began blurring the line between peer editing sessions and "small group activities." Some of these activities might focus on invention or arrangement of the students' emerging essays, others on critical analysis of a published essay. Because the students comprising each group remained pretty much the same from class session to class session, it was not a large step from these collaborative activities to peer editing sessions. Having worked together discovering and shaping ideas, students understood the contexts in which their classmates' papers had been written. They knew about problems finding sources or reaching a conclusion, about sick children and heroic last minute writing binges. What they too often did not know was how to talk about the paper in ways that would help the writer

Meanwhile, in my creative writing courses, instead of peer editing sessions, we had workshops, whole class discussions of students' stories and poems, with me as facilitator. Here,

often painfully and slowly, students learned this language of critique. They learned to do more than give a simple thumbs up or down. They learned to give comments that were complex, insightful, to show awareness of nuance and tone. And they learned to listen reflectively and attentively when their own work was discussed, to consider criticisms and suggestions for improving their poems. Yet this method, too, had its limitations. The full class workshop, by its very nature, meant individual students could only hear their work discussed every two or three weeks, and then only at a late stage of the writing process when they had already committed a great deal to the poem and were often resistant to change. Also, the sheer amount of time required to give all students regular discussion of their writing left little time for anything else. Little time to play with language, invent new poems, or discuss published poems. Working in small groups, however, students could get response to a poem, at some stage of development, in every workshop session.

So, just as I had earlier dissolved the boundary between peer editing sessions and small group workshops in my comp classes, I now began to dissolve the borders between my reconceived peer editing sessions and my creative writing workshops. The resulting workshop method attempts to meld the process-oriented small group approach of the composition classroom and the critique-oriented whole class approach of the creative writing workshop. The goals are to engage students constructively with each other's writing frequently and to create a conversation that will help each student improve her poems from draft to draft.

The "no praise/no blame method" was invented, as far as I know, by William Stafford, who used it in a workshop I attended as a way of reducing competitiveness and defensiveness in his students' discussions of their poetry. The phrase echoes an expression from the *I Ching*, where it signifies simple acceptance, without judging. Acknowledging that any honest effort at

writing a poem had worth and value, Stafford avoided letting the group get drawn into rating each other's poems, but rather directed class attention toward a poem's specific features—its lineation, its rhythms, its use of metaphor—encouraging workshop members to give specific, constructive personal response that would help the writer to see more clearly how the poem affected this particular group of individual readers.

At about this same time, as I was fumbling and improvising my way along, I discovered Wendy Bishop's inspired and practical book, *Released Into Language*. In this book Bishop argues for a more process-oriented creative writing pedagogy, one that stresses the production of drafts as well as the critiquing of finished works. In this, she reaffirmed what I had already begun doing, and in her discussion of the specific elements that might be included in such an approach, I discovered a section called "Full Group and Small Group Critique." Here she points out that both methods have advantages, small groups permitting students to try out ideas and responses in a "nonthreatening format" in which "even the shyest" student can participate. In contrast, large groups offer more opportunity "to gather and evaluate divergent opinions" as well as a greater "sense of the larger discourse community of professional writers"(53). Later, in a chapter called "Revising and Responding," Bishop stresses the need to help students develop a process and vocabulary for their critique sessions: "if a teacher responds to student writing by saying 'it doesn't seem to have a center' and 'this bothers me' and 'this is interesting,' she should not be surprised to hear her students using the same imprecise response vocabulary" (143). Instead, drawing on the work of Peter Elbow and Pat Belanoff (*Sharing and Responding*, 1989), Bishop argues that we should teach students to vary their response types depending on the stage the writing is at, with early drafts perhaps receiving no response at all and only later ones receiving a "criterion-based or judgment-based response" (144).

Armed with my prior experiences and these new-found insights, I continued to experiment with small group workshops. In doing so, I took bits and pieces from various workshops I had been in, combined them with some collaborative learning techniques, some reader response theory, and some popular transactional psychology.

The result was this method, which remains provisional and which I continue to refine and adapt to a wide range of writing workshops in composition and creative writing classes, with groups ranging from freshmen to graduate students.

Early in the course, students are introduced to this method and taught to use it in whole class workshops. Typically, especially in an introductory class, we first use this method to discuss published poems by established poets, or by student poets from a previous class, who have given permission to use their works. Besides considering the specific poems under discussion, we practice summarizing and asking questions that look beyond the poet's level of skill or the reader's predilections of taste, to matters of structure and theme, image and rhythm and voice. We relate the poems to our own experiences and imaginations, expressing doubts and uncertainties as well as satisfactions. As we do, we develop attitudes, procedures, and vocabularies that will remain important when we focus on our own writing, first in whole class workshops, and later in small group workshops.

Once students begin to catch on, they can start using the method in small groups. Sometimes students set the agenda, with some sharing early drafts or even prewriting materials, while others bring revised versions of drafts that have already been discussed. Or I may have everyone do a quick discovery activity at the start of class and then discuss the results in small group workshops later in the period.

Though details of implementation vary widely depending upon the writing genre and the course level, the key principles remain intact: 1.) Drafts are shared throughout the writing process, sometimes in small groups, sometimes with the class a whole. 2.) Every piece discussed is "work in progress," and almost every draft can be improved with revision. The goal of the workshop is to help the writer revise successfully. 3) The first respondent to a draft gives a neutral, nonjudgmental summary--what Elbow and Belanoff call "sayback response"(SR 9). 3.) Other readers respond to the draft in ways that will help the writer see how the draft affects them. 4.) Readers speak to each other—not to the writer—about the draft while the writer listens quietly, perhaps taking notes. 5.) Readers try to acknowledge the subjective, personal element in their response, to say for instance, "I felt let down by the ending," rather than, "The ending is weak." 6.) The writer always gets the last word. These are the essential elements of the process.

In calling this a "No Praise/No Blame Method" I don't intend to convey to you now, or especially to my students that I think all poems are equally excellent, or that there is no way to tell a good poem from a bad one. On the contrary, I want to relocate the center of value from a hazy Platonic ideal of poetic excellence to a felt sense of how the poem is valued by actual readers. To accomplish this, and to include what Elbow and Belanoff call "criterion–based feedback" (SR 11), I give students a set of criteria, which you'll find in Figure 1 below. We discuss various criteria and how they might be evident in the poems, especially the published poems that we've been reading. And I encourage the students to consider and make explicit the qualities they most value in poetry. I explain that the handout, which I again regard as temporary and provisional and always subject to revision, represents my best attempt to tell them what I believe they should strive for in their poems. Still, like any such list, it is necessarily subjective, reflecting my own experiences and tastes. Another teacher would no doubt compose a different

list. But here in this class where I am the teacher, these are my criteria, which I bring to the table and which I am always willing to reconsider.

To have such explicit criteria and at the same time to promote a No Praise/No Blame workshop model may appear contradictory: telling students to avoid judging or evaluating their classmates' poetry while simultaneously holding my own evaluation criteria over everyone's head. But what I am really asking my students to do is suspend judgment, to downplay it, to keep it in perspective, and to see it in the context of this particular group. We all know quality matters. We all want to write the best poems, get A's, get published, win prizes, be on TV. But wait, back up, I'm trying to say. Forget all that stuff for a while and grant the poem simple acceptance, engage the words on the page, hear the writer's voice tremble as he reads through those lines about learning to dance. Forget where the poem might rate on some neo-Platonic scale of poetic quality and hear what the writer is saying, or almost saying, wanting to say, and help him find how to say it (Elbow and Belanoff SR25). Help him find ways to make the language fresher, the images sharper, the opening quicker. Let him know which lines unsettled you or made you laugh or confused you. Help him to see more clearly how the poem affected you. And encourage your classmates, other people in the group, to do the same. And the writer sits quietly listening.

In such a collaborative context, "students," in Kenneth Bruffee's words, "translate the language that they bring to the task into a composite working vocabulary common to the particular small group they are working in" (78-79). Further, as they return to the larger, whole class workshop, they learn to translate this small group vocabulary to that of a larger, more authoritative interpretive community represented by the instructor. It's a dynamic process in which terms, boundaries, values, theories, and beliefs are constantly discussed and redefined. But this isn't learning theory or even literary theory we're discussing here, it's poetry. And the most

fundamental workshop goal is to create a supportive and non-threatening, yet challenging

atmosphere in which students get deeply involved in writing and discussing drafts of their

poems.

The process for discussing these drafts is outlined in Figure 2 below. I've tried to make

this straightforward and clear on the surface. Still, some attention to specific points may be

warranted. First, by calling these "Reader Response Guidelines and beginning them with the

quote from Stafford, I want to place the method in the context of Reader Response Theory. I

want writers to get a good sense of how the poem "lives" to Stafford's telling word, in the minds

of its readers, and I want readers to attend not only to the poem, but to their own responses and

how these responses are expressed to the group. It's not that I consider myself a reader response

critic, but that I find this to be a useful approach for the ends I wish to accomplish. Perhaps that

makes me a pragmatist. These are guidelines and suggestions, not rules, to help students respond

effectively and constructively.

The bulleted list at the top contains some general principles and thoughts that guide our

discussions. Since these stress the writing's unfinished quality and the need for guidance and

direction in revision, they are not too useful for discussions of published poems, though such

speculations can prove interesting. Usually I briefly discuss points two and four, explaining that

it's generally best to acknowledge the subjective element when you spot a problem and to ask

other group members for their responses. Do other group members also have a problem with the

ending, for instance? If so, how might it be solved (or "What if...?"), so that the discussion is

extended and expanded, rather than shut down with a summary judgment.

The numbered list that follows outlines the basic process that we use whether in a large

group or in small ones. It represents a synthesis of processes used in several workshops and

writing groups that I've participated in. Key points here are one, two, three, six, and seven. We practice these points in the whole class workshops, and when students work in small groups, especially early in the term, I make a point to ensure that the process is followed, sometimes by eavesdropping, sometimes by sitting in on a group and modeling responses. Point two is one that students especially like to skip, but I try to hold them to it, and eventually, usually after hearing a good summary of their own poem, they seem to appreciate its value.

The "conversation starters" at the bottom of the page are attempts to provide prompts, or cues, to revive a flagging discussion or shift direction without judging or evaluating. I wish I could tell you exactly where each of these comes from, but I don't know that for sure. Some echo procedures recommended by Elbow and Belanoff. Others are comments I remember hearing in workshops or writing groups in which I've participated. A few sound like something salvaged from a couples' workshop. Perhaps something here is original, but I won't swear to it.

So that's the process and some of the rationale as it appears in a poetry writing class, especially an introductory class. As I said above, I've also found the method to be useful in other classes, both composition and creative writing, at all levels from freshman through graduate. While the key principles remain the same, I often vary the implementation by changing individual elements. In more advanced classes, for instance, I often have the whole group generate the criteria sheet, first by proposing and discussing various criteria in small groups and then synthesizing and refining these in a group of the whole. Then, I'll type up and copy a final draft for them to keep in their notebooks. In an introductory group, I'll be more directive about both criteria and response procedures. Still whatever the class's level or genre, I've found this particular fusion of methods developed in composition and creative writing pedagogy allows me

to create a classroom context that allows students to tap into a whole world of conversation that

surrounds their writing.

Figure 1:

Some Criteria for Judging Poetry

Our best poems--

are authentic. They come from a place inside of us that is real. They are spoken in our own voices and touch on matters that genuinely concern us.

give us back our lives. They help us remember who we are and what we believe. In a world where we are continually pushed and pulled in a hundred directions by forces we sometimes only half understand, they help us stay centered and focused on what we most care about.

surprise us. They use language in fresh and interesting ways. They offer unexpected insights and understandings into ourselves and each other. They offer new ways of imagining our potential as human beings.

touch the "poles of life." They don't back away from difficult issues such as birth and death, peace and war, love and hate, elation and despair, the sacred and the profane, but they find ways of talking about these issues, and in doing so, they help us come to terms with essential parts of human experience that might otherwise be passed over alone and in silence.

make every word work. They value language. They are high energy structures. Every word must earn its place in the poem. Every image must be necessary. If it doesn't add, it takes away. Nothing is neutral.

grow out of concrete particulars. They are made of the stuff of life. "No ideas but in things." Abstractions and generalizations are the stuff of prose, not poetry. If used at all, they should be "earned." "For all the history of grief/an empty doorway and a maple leaf."--Archibald MacLiesh.

try to say what can't be said. They test the possibilities of language by attempting to bring new areas of experience into awareness. Whether the writer is attempting to resolve a paradox, to recreate a dream, or to discuss the death of a loved one, the poem stretches to say what the writer didn't previously think could be said.

contain a residue of mystery. They are not quite paraphrasable or translatable. They evoke strong responses in their readers, but even after rereading and extensive discussion, there remains something elusive and mysterious that invites the reader back for another look.

Figure 2:

No Praise/No Blame Workshop Guidelines

As you comment on one another's drafts, please keep the following points in mind:

1) These are *not* finished. Some roughness is expected.

2) If you notice problems, call them to the writer's attention, but in a way that offers suggestions for revision.

3) Try to understand the writer's goals. Don't try to make the poem or story into what *you* want it to be. Try to help make it into what the *writer* wants it to be.

4) Point out strengths whenever possible. Make your comments specific. Point to particular passages and explain why they work well.

In your discussions, please follow the procedure below as closely as possible:

1. Have the writer read the draft aloud while other group members jot down notes.

2. Have one group member summarize the gist of the work--its central concern, striking features, dominant images, sources of tension, its crisis or turning point, etc.

3. Have other group members comment on the summary, supplementing or modifying it.

4 Have the writer reread the opening. What sort of tone does it establish? Does it invite further reading? Does it set up expectations of what will follow?

5. Have the writer reread the closing. Does it satisfy the expectations set up at the beginning? Does it leave you with a sense of satisfaction and completion?

6 Have the writer read a short passage from the heart of the work.

7 Ask the writer to comment and especially to raise any questions that you haven't already covered.

Try these conversation starters:

- Another way to look at it would be . . .
- I think the writer wants to . . .
- I wonder why . . .
- What if . . .
- This reminds me of . . .

- I was most struck by . . .
- This makes me feel . . .
- I want to hear more about . . .
- Let's look more closely at . . .
- So the point is . . .

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