

Rethinking Creative-Writing Workshop Feedback in the 21st Century

AWP 2022

Jameelah Lang, Alexandra Kleeman, Shonda Buchanan, Barney Haney, Christopher Coake

Event Description:

This panel examines modes of feedback as a genre that necessitates critique in light of implicit pedagogical traditions and biases that dehumanize the writing workshop. We will discuss how to collaboratively unpack power dynamics and cultural assumptions to build equitable, inclusive workshops. We will discuss different modes and levels of workshops, drawing upon a range of techniques and perspectives from small colleges to HBCUs to large state universities and points in between.

Event Category:

Pedagogy

Biographies:

Jameelah Lang is an Assistant Professor at Rockhurst University. Her work appears in the Kenyon Review, Cincinnati Review, Pleiades, & more. She has received awards from Bread Loaf, Sewanee Writers Conference, VCCA, & HUB-BUB. She's a board member for Radius of Arab American Writers (Event Organizer & Moderator)

Alexandra Kleeman is the author of *You Too Can Have A Body Like Mine*, *Intimations*, and the novel *Something New Under the Sun*, and an Assistant Professor at the New School. Her work has been published in *The New Yorker*, *The Paris Review*, *n+1*, *Harper's*, *the New York Times Magazine*, and *Conjunctions*.

Author of *Black Indian*, and a journalist for over 25 years, Shonda Buchanan is an award-winning poet and educator teaching at Loyola Marymount University. She's working on a second memoir, two novels and a 4th book of poetry: *Black Indian*.

Barney T. Haney teaches English at the University of Indianapolis where he is chair of the Kellogg Writers Series. Winner of the Chris O'Malley Fiction Prize, his work has appeared in or is forthcoming from *Mid-American Review*, *Marathon Literary Review*, and *Barely South Review*, among others.

Christopher Coake is the author of the novel *You Came Back* and the story collection *We're in Trouble*, for which he won the PEN/Robert Bingham Fellowship. In 2006 he was named a Best Young American Novelist by *Granta*. He teaches and directs the MFA program at the University of Nevada, Reno.

Presentation Outline:

1) Jameelah Lang:

- History & expectations for “audience” and instructor in the creative-writing workshop.
 - o Historical expectations: “the audience” & “the reader”
 - o Formation of the modern workshop and its assumptions: Iowa, “Creative writing can’t be taught.” (*The Elephants Teach*)
 - o Oral storytelling and Western written storytelling traditions in terms of audience expectations: how and understanding of different storytelling norms can guide us
- Cultural subjectivity in peer & instructor review.
 - o Terminology, and rethinking its implications – “Craft in the Real World”
 - Terminology assignment in my CW workshops for collaboratively defined terms
- Alternative guiding principles
 - o Collective decision-making about the workshop space, incl. form of workshop letters. Informed by rejection of individualism and desire to challenge instructor as neutral or authoritative.
 - o Acknowledge historical context: both for storytelling & workshops.
 - Critique of sample letter and syllabi to establish subjectivity.
 - o Allow for alternate readerships
 - Allow students to identify their own readership, making space for non-writers into the conversation about readership
 - o New possibilities: letters written collectively, recorded, written after workshop rather than before, written during workshop, etc.

2) Alexandra Kleeman:

- Student feedback written before class
- Focusing on chains of statement, support, and qualification.
- I place an emphasis in my classes on grounding opinion via textual markers and articulating a path through the text that illustrates the reader’s experience.
- Ultimately, the student is asked to reflect not just on the workshop piece but on what type of reader they are, and how these preferences ground their critique.

3) Shonda Buchanan:

- Empowering student voice "to take risks and move beyond predefined artistic norms" by integrating popular culture into workshops;
- Empowering students to learn, incorporate and then challenge traditional European tropes, i.e., "predefined artistic norms" to explore identity, humanity and community.

4) Barney Haney:

- Training students to be better readers
- Feedback in the General Education Introductory Creative Writing Workshop

- Written Feedback Due Before In-person workshop
- Written response forms that reflect objective study practices
- Making space for author-created questions
- Relieves some anxieties and allows for processing of initial reactions
- In-person workshop
- Author-led, small-group discussions
- Traditional cone of silence moved from author onto responders who offer feedback upon author's request

5) Christopher Coake:

- Very brief explanation of nature of workshops at UNR, esp. MFA-level fiction
- What's worked and hasn't via traditional feedback methods
 - o My position as an instructor who's still learning
- Setting tone for feedback
 - o at beginning of semester, discuss expectations for feedback
 - o provide opportunities for students to discuss what they hope for in workshop and in written critiques
 - o provide critique and Artist's Statement templates
- Before workshop
 - o offer students a chance to pre-game workshop session with instructor
 - What concerns might they have?
 - How can I guide discussion?
 - o Students submit Artist's Statement along with work
 - Reasons for writing the piece and ambitions for it; content warnings if necessary
 - What do they want to protect in the piece?
 - What concerns do they have about it?
- Other students and instructor write critiques
- During workshop
 - o My role as discussion leader
 - o Involving student authors
 - o Example of success from past semester

Moderator Discussion Questions:

- **How might these feedback practices be useful to a student beyond the creative writing workshop?**
- **How openly do you discuss the scholarly conversation around the workshop with your students, including many recent (and vital) perspectives on how we can deconstruct its principles?**
- Where do we go from here? How do we look to the future?
- How is this conversation about feedback affected by the rapidly changing literary landscape?
- How has feedback changed for you or been informed by the pandemic?