AWP Event Outline

Welcome to “Workshop Feedback: An Unmanageable Labor of Love?”
A few reminders before we begin:

- For those needing or wishing to follow along to a written text, please let the moderator, Dustin M. Hoffman, know, and a printed copy will be delivered to you.
- Please make sure that spaces marked for wheelchairs remain clear of chairs or other barriers.
- Treat service animals as working animals and do not attempt to distract or pet them.
- Be aware of those with chemical sensitivities and refrain from wearing scented products.
- Please be aware that your fellow attendees may have invisible disabilities. Do not question anyone’s use of an accommodation while at the conference, including for chairs reserved for those with disabilities.

Event Title: Workshop Feedback: An Unmanageable Labor of Love?

Event Description:
Crafting useful feedback for student writing in workshops is one of our most important duties. However, poring over student drafts can be arduous and time consuming. How much should we comment at the macro and line level? How to inspire and encourage writers while also challenging them to revise? Five teachers across multiple genres will discuss sustainable best practices for providing feedback and why workshop comments are so unique in academia and worth the momentous efforts.

Event Category: Pedagogy

Event Organizer and Moderator:
Dustin M. Hoffman is the author of the story collections One-Hundred-Knuckled Fist (winner of the 2015 Prairie Schooner Book Prize), No Good for Digging, and the chapbook Secrets of the Wild. His newest collection, Such a Good Man, is forthcoming from University of Wisconsin Press. He painted houses for ten years in Michigan and now teaches creative writing at Winthrop University in South Carolina.
Event Participants:
**Traci Brimhall** is the author of five collections of poetry and the current Poet Laureate of Kansas. She teaches at Kansas State University, where she directs the creative writing program. She has taught writing workshops in poetry, fiction, and nonfiction, as well as interdisciplinary narrative medicine courses. She’s received numerous teaching awards from her department, college, and the first-year studies program.

**Brad Aaron Modlin** wrote *Everyone at This Party Has Two Names* (winner of the Cowles Poetry Prize) and *Surviving in Drought* (stories, winner of the annual contest from The Cupboard). His work has been the basis for orchestral scores and art exhibits and has been featured by *Poetry Unbound*, *The Slowdown*, and the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. He is The Reynolds Endowed Chair in Creative Writing at University of Nebraska in Kearney, where he teaches undergrads and graduates. In the fall, he’s leading a study abroad trip full of poetry and long-distance walking.

**Misha Rai**’s work has received support from the Kenyon Review Fellowships, Bread Loaf, the Whiting Foundation, the Ucross Foundation, McDowell, Virginia Colony for the Creative Arts, and the Dana Award in the Novel Category. She teaches creative writing at Sewanee: The University of the South.

**Anne Valente** is the author of two novels, *Our Hearts Will Burn Us Down* and *The Desert Sky Before Us*, as well as the short story collection, *By Light We Knew Our Names*. Her fiction has appeared in *One Story*, *American Short Fiction*, *The Kenyon Review* and *The Chicago Tribune*, and her essays have appeared in *The Believer*, *Guernica*, *Literary Hub* and *The Washington Post*. Originally from St. Louis, she is currently an associate professor of creative writing at Hamilton College in upstate New York.

Opening Moderator Remarks:
I’m truly honored to have the chance to moderate this panel titled “Workshop Feedback: An Unmanageable Labor of Love?” I spent a decade working as a housepainter in Michigan right up to the 2008 recession, and I just barely escaped that recession that ravaged many of my fellow tradespeople. I was lucky to land a career teaching, which I’ve done for the last fifteen years, and now I primarily teach creative writing workshops at Winthrop University in South Carolina. While this job is a lot more gratifying than painting houses, in many ways (not in all ways), it is still labor. It is certainly hard work, and it’s a job I take very seriously. Sure, I don’t have to inhale paint fumes or spend twelve-hour shifts perched on a
twenty-foot extension ladder, but that doesn’t mean this gig is easier. During the semester, I’m usually teaching two to three workshops classes, and I end up working longer days than I used to in construction. Because I had great workshop teachers when I was a student—teachers who filled my margins and left generous line comments—I feel a sense of duty to follow those footsteps and honor their efforts. I spend 2-3 hours on every story up for workshop. I strive to take all student writing seriously, every voice, every artistic effort. And, sure, sometimes those efforts seem dubious when I get stories full of typos and missing endings and full of clichés. But I refuse to take any work of art for granted. I’m a “see something say something” kind of teacher, noting everything I see in line comments and always leaving a 600-1,000-word editorial letter. I base my pedagogy on giving detailed feedback. I grade on revision. I push against the idea that there can be a one-size-fits-all rubric for art, and my notes serve as personalized rubrics, though I’m rarely prescriptive, and most of my notes ask questions and offer interpretations and strive to meet a story for its unique aspirations. But that’s hard to do—personalizing everything. I’m old school, I think. And I probably do way too much, but my students are consistently grateful.

And I suppose that’s why I proposed this panel and tracked down these fantastic speakers. I’m curious to hear what others are up to and if there are better ways. I worry about sustainability and burnout, especially when universities—driven by profits and wanting to take advantage of popular creative writing classes—are pushing for larger class sizes. So here we can talk about that, about what we do and how we can do it better, for I know everyone on this panel loves what we do, and I bet we’re all in this for life. So, how might we make this a better life? I’ll ask some questions of our panel to collect insights from this group of brilliant teachers.

**Moderator Questions with Participant Initial Responses:**

1. **What’s your process of commenting on workshop pieces like? How much time do you spend per work? What is most important for you when leaving feedback?**

Valente: In commenting on workshop pieces, my standard practice is to provide both line edits and a global editorial letter, though I’ve shifted this practice in the past year to instead ask the student author what their preferred method of feedback might be, and everyone in class – myself included – abides by those preferences. Generally speaking, however, the vast majority of students desire both marginal notes and an endnote, and this process largely takes me an hour or so per short story/poem/novel excerpt. While my
tendency is to highlight absolutely everything, including grammar and punctuation, I’ve tried to reign in my comments so as not to overwhelm the student with a flood of notes and instead focus on a handful of most pressing topics, including positive feedback in terms of the piece’s strengths.

Brimhall: My guidelines for myself are the same as for my students. As the level of course increases, so does the amount of feedback. Most importantly, I think workshop should feel like a tarot reading where we explore the possible futures of a work rather than prescribing cuts and approaching it like we are fixing a broken story/poem.

Modlin: We’re looking for possibility not perfection.

It’s important to me that my feedback encourages students to keep writing. I want to leave them with questions and what-if’s that help them return to the work with energy. I’ll offer contradictory possibilities (“What if you moved the final stanza to the top? What if the final stanza remained where it is with expansion?”) to encourage openness and avoid me telling them exactly what to do. Rather than asking, “What is the one best way?” I hope students are asking, “What would be the consequences of Way A, and how can I make Way A happen well?”

I’m saying *We’re not looking for perfection*, but poets can be perfectionistic, and sometimes it’s hard to distinguish which concerns are macro versus micro—which is evident in how I comment.

The bird’s-eye view is important, but so is the linear experience that the first-time reader has. With poetry, I always do one top-down read, wherein I read aloud, and note thoughts as they come. (”*The raspberry seeds I couldn’t remove/from my teeth. Nice enjambment there. Breaking on remove helps us see this as a metaphor about what we can’t let go of. The sweater dipped in acid. I don’t quite know how to take this line. I wonder if…”*) Though I’m giving reactions in some form of real time, this is not my first read. This top-down read gives me a-ha’s about the work, and I let that be part of the feedback too. (“My first couple reads, I was thinking the beloved had left, but now this line makes me think they are on the porch swing the whole time, but mentally absent. If you want the reader to know for certain, what clues may be useful?”) I never know what the student is most proud of—maybe it’s a little detail that wouldn’t find its way into my macro-focused critique. The top-down read ensures smaller things are noted as well.

With macro feedback, I’m sharing what questions the piece seems to ask, what it’s about. What are the piece’s most characteristic elements—
which craft elements does it seem are this poem’s favorite? How does it match the particular skills this writer has been showing this semester? If the poem’s best moment is one kick-ass metaphor, then I’ll happily devote a lot of feedback time and energy to it to help the student consider how she made this metaphor and how to do it again. And how future poems can spotlight this skill. Because it’s a strength that may become central to her own process, I think of it as macro concern worth prioritizing—even if seemingly larger concerns like overall structure or argument are not working.

I like to think that I’m not necessarily helping them perfect a piece as much as develop skills of looking.

Depending on class size and frequency of drafts, I comment 20-30 minutes for each piece (before workshop).

Misha: For me providing feedback is a collaborative process so I provide verbal feedback. This can take anywhere between 20 minutes for a short writing exercise, 60 minutes for a short story, and about 2 hours for a novella workshop.

2. What are some struggles you’ve faced with leaving feedback, especially in regards to unsustainability and/or burnout?

Valente: Given the high load of workshop feedback each week, I’ve really tried to whittle down the amount of time I spend per creative piece, focusing in on the most pressing issues as mentioned previously. This helps me in terms of time and burnout, and I’ve found that it also helps the student in not overwhelming them with too many notes, instead zeroing in on a few manageable goals for revision.

Brimhall: Honestly, some of my biggest issue is that I try and put 15 years of my own learning into 15 weeks. I have to continue to remind myself that I can’t give students everything; I have to help them take the next step or two and pass on tools, but MOSTLY they need to have their passion and enthusiasm stoked so that their own interests can carry them through more years of dedication to writing.

Modlin: On the one hand, I could spend hours and hours on each piece. On the other, I don’t have that many hours! Some of my most dedicated students ask for extra feedback—showing me revisions during the semester or asking for feedback on out-of-class work. I definitely want to provide that mentorship, and it’s energizing to see how they’re growing, but it’s extra
time—time I hadn’t planned on. In these cases, I sometimes set a timer to help me manage the time well.

Misha: Honestly, when I faced burnout the biggest issue I struggled with was getting my students their work on time. The other thing I worried about was providing adequate feedback as well as quality feedback.

3. **Have you found any secrets, any hacks, to make commenting more efficient and/or more purposeful and accessible for students?**

Valente: I usually edit Word and PDF documents from students, but I’ve recently started using Google Docs as well to comment on student work—especially since they seem to prefer this and most use Google Drive for their works. Though I haven’t done this yet, colleagues have mentioned that often-used comments can be saved in Google Docs, if there are specific issues I might find myself commenting on regularly across a variety of creative works. In addition, since students seem to prefer Google Docs in terms of accessibility and readability, I’ve found that Google Docs are useful for speed of commenting, for the possibility of the student compiling all of their feedback from everyone into a single document, and for the option too of the student saving separate documents of the same story to compare notes from each workshop participant.

Brimhall: I think dividing up the workshop groups into craft elements helps 1) teach close reading; 2) make sure all elements of craft are discussed in workshop; 3) ensure everyone contributes; 4) streamline the amount of labor that goes into workshop comments.

Modlin: Inviting the writer/other students to help create the feedback conversation. When students turn in writing, they include two questions for the workshop/me. This helps our feedback be purposeful and geared to the writer. Sometimes in workshop, the writer herself leads the conversation, asking us questions that matter to her.

    Alongside the piece, I assign the introductory CW student to write a reflection on what her poem is doing. (What unique images has she included? How does the title interact with the story’s conclusion?) This strengthens the writer’s eye—for her work and others. It also allows my feedback to be in conversation with what she has said.

    If a number of students are experiencing the same trouble spots, I like to discuss those in class, with student work we’ve all seen as examples.
Rather than feedbacking to each student about improving uninteresting line breaks, talking together about what makes line breaks interesting—with student examples—can be more efficient and gentle.

Misha: Yes, or so I believe. And I want to say at the outset that this works specifically for me—I don’t have children or large classes. I do not provide in-text comments, instead I go over each story with a student line by line. The students see in real time how stories affect their audience—in this case, me. My students visit me seven time a semester and I spend long hours in my office, but I never have to take marking home.

4. **Are there any technological innovations or new pedagogical practices that you’re using or interested in using?**

Valente: In addition to using Google Docs individually with students, I’ve considered using Google Docs as a class to collectively comment on either a student’s workshop piece or a student creative exercise. This could be done either via projection or through each person accessing the same document from each of their devices. This isn’t necessarily technologically innovative, since Google Docs has been around for some time, but would be new-to-me in workshop. In terms of pedagogical practices, I’ve raised and implemented the possibility of all-verbal feedback, if a student might prefer this to written comments, which saves time on written comments while also allowing for the student to solicit the kind of feedback they wish.

Brimall: Not super innovative, but having workshops posted on Canvas allows even those who are sick to still provide workshop comments and keeps everything accessible.

I also use the Canvas “like” feature in poetry workshops because we also read workshop *a little bit* like journal editors because we work on submission skills in the advanced workshop as well.

Modlin: This semester, I am assigning students to give two very different versions of the same poem to workshop. Our feedback will compare the two.

Misha: Because I do not provide written feedback, I ask my students to record our conversations on their phone. For smaller projects I made recordings, so it helps them access the recordings while they are doing other tasks, especially students who overextend themselves in other walks of their lives.
5. What do you love about the feedback process? What keeps you coming back to the workshop, especially in terms of commenting, despite all the arduous labor required?

Valente: I love the back-and-forth, communal process of editing and revising work together in the workshop, through written feedback and through discussion of each other’s work. I also love the surprise of coming upon a beautiful turn of phrase, a sentence that gives me pause, or an order of syntax that I’d never have considered before. This is the perpetual joy, for me, in engaging in the workshop and feedback process, which keeps my own creativity—and creative work—continuously curious and infused with new ideas.

Brimhall: For me, it’s connection. I genuinely like people, and I enjoy my students. I like learning about them. I like encouraging them. I like seeing what’s interesting or full of potential in each piece of writing. And selfishly, I’m a better writer because every time I go back to the basics I’m reminded how to fix/improve/explore things in my own work.

Modlin: The reason it’s arduous is what makes it fun: each piece is different. The challenge of brainstorming with each student is always new. Writers, students included, are very engaged when the subject is their own work and growth. Offering feedback makes me a better reader for friends or myself.

Misha: Knowing that I am providing timely feedback to my students that allows them to process the feedback in real time continues to reinforce my love for workshop feedback. Perhaps I am biased, but ever since I began to use this one-to-one, verbal feedback method, the returns—students revising their work—have increased significantly.

Q&A Session