



Writing at Iowa

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It would be tempting to say that the University of Iowa brought the word *workshop* into our language, but that would not be true. It is true that *The American Heritage Dictionary*, with publication dates that begin in 1969, offers as its second definition of *workshop*, "a group of people who meet regularly for a seminar in some specialized field: a *creative-writing workshop*." And it is equally true that the modern use of *workshop*, in that sense, and *creative writing* as well, can best be traced to here. But *workshop* has a much older history, and a distinguished one, to which our university has but added. Its first citation (1582) in the *Oxford English Dictionary* refers to Alexander the Great hanging out in the workshop of the fourth century B.C. Greek painter, Apelles.

Workshop is a curious term, one that crosses art with manual labor. "Shop" derives from the Old English, *sceoppa*, which meant a "booth" or "stall," as in a market. There is a working-class feel to the word that enjoys long standing. But Old English *weorc*, also meant an "act" or "deed" as well as its obvious cognate; and so, depending on how one feels about it, manual labor is either granted a certain dignity, even nobility as a "deed," or deeds of high cultural standing color themselves favorably with the patina of hands-on labor. "Work" in turn derived, so the lexicographers tell us, from an Indo-European root, *werg*, which is related to the Greek *ergon*, meaning "work" or "action." *Werg* shows up in "energy," "allergy," "liturgy," "georgic," and "surgery," to name but a few, as it also does in "organ" and "orgy." Each of these words has been called upon at one time or another to describe an aspect of our Workshop.

Settled into an agricultural area, it has been seen by some as hopelessly lost in the "georgic." But one can come here and

develop an allergic reaction to that and find the energy to go off in quite a different direction. To some, workshops proceed with all too surgical a view of how to repair writing developed within it. To others, work arising here takes on a high priestly cast and becomes part of a wanted or unwanted national liturgy. I will leave to you a few further possibilities.

Returning to the *OED*, the conflation of labor with art continues through the history of the word. In 1775, Samuel Johnson observes that "supreme beauty is seldom found in cottages or work shops." A third citation equates workshops with prisons. Then Dickens mentions furniture and their verneerings, the surface of which "smelt a little too much of the workshop and was a trifle sticky," which is the very sort of thing said, nowadays, about certain stories or poems, works that mean well and achieve a great deal, but are less than fully accomplished or are, perhaps, merely being reviewed by skeptical outsiders. By the turn of the century, in the Acts of Edward VII, a workshop is defined as "any premises, room or place, not being a factory, in which . . . any manual labor is exercised." Whereas W.P. Ker, at almost the same moment, refers to the "secrets" of Dryden's "dramatic workshop," and so returns the term to the surprising artistic surroundings of its first, Renaissance usage.

When Ker wrote that last in 1901, the University of Iowa already enjoyed a tradition of being hospitable to the creative use of the written word. Literary and debating societies for men and women both had flourished since the Civil War. By the turn of the century, a few professors began to make student writing both the substance and the product of their courses. Several enlightened administrators—department heads, deans, and presidents—built on this emerging tradition. In the twenties, academic credit was permitted for creation and performance in the musical and visual arts and in theater. The English Department held back a little longer, but by 1931, it too had awarded a degree in literature for which the thesis was a volume of poems; and in 1935, it granted its first Ph.D. with a creative dissertation, which was a collection of essays. These

degrees depended upon a university wide agreement, ratified in the early twenties, that research should be conceived as a creative act, an agreement that bridged the humanities and the sciences.

The Writers' Workshop dates itself from the late thirties. Paul Engle, whose visionary direction of it was most responsible for lifting a locally flourishing program to national prominence, did not arrive until 1937; but creative writing courses had been in place as early as 1896. *The Midland*, a literary journal of regionalist dedication, under the editorial direction of John T. Frederick, began in Iowa City in 1915. *American Prefaces*, another literary journal, more national in its outlook, began in 1935, with the strong backing of Norman Foerster, then professor of English and Director of the School of Letters. The climate, you might say, was right for what developed, or as Sherman Paul was to say later, the university provided the "necessary critical situation."¹

Whereas the Writers' Workshop is the best known result of all this activity—I remember one cultural map of the United States rendered in *Esquire* a decade or two ago that designated Boston, New York, and Iowa City as our literary capitals—this remarkably productive and resilient institution, the graduates of which seem to turn up everywhere, has hardly been the sole performer. Not only was there a well prepared literary and critical atmosphere ready to receive it, but there was also equal and earlier leadership in the other arts. Moreover, permutations of its practices, most of which have arrived at originalities all their own, have kept it good company through the years.

¹This history has been written in whole or in part in several other forms, from which I merely steal. It behooves me to mention these sources: "Creativity at the University—The Iowa Experience," J. Richard Wilmeth and "The Life of the Mind," Sherman Paul, both in *The Iowa Review* (14/3, 1984, 141-151); *The World Comes to Iowa: Iowa International Anthology*, eds, Paul Engle, Rowena Torrevillas, and Hualing Nieh Engle (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1987), xv-xxxii; *A Pictorial History of the University of Iowa*, John C. Gerber (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1988), 33, 112-113, 226-227; *The University of Iowa in the Twentieth Century: An Institutional History*, Stow Persons (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1990), 119-121. *The Iowa Writers' Workshop: Origins, Emergence, & Growth*, Steve Wilbers (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1980).

The range of university programs in which writing is the focus is amazingly broad. Iowa's School of Journalism has a long and distinguished history, and *The Daily Iowan* enjoys a long run as an award winning student paper. Our Program in Rhetoric was one of the first university programs to combine instruction in speech and composition. Studies in the teaching of writing have been the central professional interests of a number of our professors, in English, in the Rhetoric Program, and in the School of Education. In 1950, Iowa professors helped found the Conference on College Composition and Communication, with John Gerber as its first chairman. Richard Brad-dock and Richard Lloyd-Jones later chaired the same organiza-tion and were enormously influential in shaping early research in written composition. Twice, in the late sixties and again in 1979-1984, the National Defense Education Act and then the National Endowment for the Humanities funded Iowa Insti-tutes on Writing, led by Carl Klaus, in which directors of other college and university writing programs came here for further study. A laboratory to tutor students with special difficulties in writing opened in 1940 and has been a fixture ever since, most prominently under Lou Kelly. Beginning in the late seventies, there has been an MA in English dedicated to non-fiction writing, with its own program of courses, both parallel to and divergent from courses in the Writers' Workshop. At about the same time, Iowa faculty, most notably, Cleo Martin, combined with public school administrators to initiate the Southeast Iowa Writing Project, later the Iowa Writing Project, in which K-12 teachers improve their own writing and concern themselves with designing better writing instruction for their own classes.

Paul and Hualing Nieh Engle developed also an Interna-tional Writing Program that has for years brought thirty or more writers, each "proven and published talents" in his or her homeland, to our campus to discuss their craft for most of each fall semester. That program continues under the direction of Clark Blaise. Magazines have flourished too. First the scholarly *Philological Quarterly*, but also, and equally, the more literary journals—*The Midland* and *American Prefaces*, as mentioned

before, then *The Western Review* and *The Iowa Review*, not to mention dozens of smaller, short-lived magazines. Literary publication seems to have led naturally to a fuller sense of printing as an art and so to a community of fine press printers and associated artists and scholars as is discussed here in other essays. To all these activities writing is the sine qua non. Because of writing, because of a care for writing enacted at Iowa, all these programs have been able to survive and often flourish.

Everywhere, in these activities, some idea of a workshop is central. And if Iowa did not invent or define the word, it can claim credit, or blame, for the inevitable verb concocted in its wake. One cannot walk our hallways long without hearing someone say, "My story got workshopped yesterday," or "We'll be workshopping in my class tomorrow."

With thousands of people having played their parts in all this as both students and instructors, and so with innumerable permutations of the form, it is foolish to generalize much about the practice of teaching writing at Iowa. Overall, though, it turns on the idea of a workshop, and so let me stress the democratic notion at its heart. There are teachers, certainly. Often enough, there have been masters to whom one simply wishes to listen. But reaching over and under and through all that is the idea of peers helping each other. That in turn leads to the discovery most teachers make of not needing to see themselves as always in control, of relaxing their grip on the room and letting participants teach each other, and of learning from their students.

This was less true, one presumes, in the workshops of Dryden and Apelles. "Workshop" in that instance, may have only been a metaphor for a studio or study. If so, the genius of Iowa has not been to continue a metaphor but to realize, boldly, the literal meaning at its heart and to uncover its special potential.

Again and again one hears around here that student writers learn more from each other than from their instructors. Were the figure ever to be discovered, I am sure it would show that

a huge percentage of workshops yield splinter groups that continue productively on their own. In one sense, this is little more than the coffee house society of artists everywhere, the *tertulia*, as it is called in Spain, in which a small group meets regularly, often for many years, in a given cafe, to discuss their special, usually literary concerns. But in another sense it is more because it has been extended through the peculiar American genius of running so many good things through our universities; and in this case, that extension began at Iowa.

It doesn't always work. Not every workshop is a success. Not every instructor can guide, more often than not, a group of emerging writers to helpful ideas about their own work as it is under discussion. Nor are all students given to cooperation. Exposing one's work and examining that of peers leads inevitably to a degree of competition, with its damaging side as well as its better effects. But students wouldn't keep coming to these programs if competition were all they were about, nor would so many of them emerge as fine writers.

For the real secret of the workshop method is the discovery that written work is no one person's possession, that work emerges from a community, and so from a culture, which will place its stamp upon it, that good work distinguishes that community, and that fine work ennobles it. Perhaps, then, it is no surprise that this discovery should have played so well at Iowa, in a geography of low hills, farmland, and prairie, where nobility, as such, has never been much of an issue.