



Signal to Noise Ratio: Information Overload and Feedback Reception

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ABSTRACT

The creative writing workshop, as the foundational pedagogy of our field, has been critiqued from many angles. Important criticisms of this once static and monolithic teaching methodology have helped to envision and create more inclusive and dynamic workshop environments. However, an essential element of the workshop that needs to be more thoroughly explored involves the range and abundance of often contradictory written feedback it produces. Considering how the size of workshop classes keeps expanding to unwieldy numbers, the issue of how students handle written feedback from their peers becomes even more challenging. We should not forget that the definition of feedback involves not only information sharing, but also sound distortion. The question becomes, “What are students supposed to do with all that noise?” How are they to make use of this abundance of written responses, the stacks of poems or stories accompanied by workshop letters and marginalia? How do distance and digital environments affect this communication and reception? As instructors, how does our own written feedback come into play? How can we help adjust the signal to noise ratio of workshop feedback so these written communications and exchanges can be more beneficial?

An important starting point involves reflecting on the type of feedback our students need as well as how we are teaching students to provide feedback for one another. Pamela Annas and Joyce Peseroff suggest having students “frame workshop guidelines” by asking students “What do [they] want others to say about their work? What will they find helpful?” (90). Additionally, Annas and Peseroff discuss alternate genres and strategies for written response like “lab reports” that allow the writer to describe their process, agenda and questions (91). Janelle Adsit also emphasizes the importance of the writer’s role in framing and participating in the discussion of their own texts, arguing for the elimination of the “cardinal rule” requiring the writer’s silence, which helps alleviate what Patrick Bizarro describes as “the abandonment of apprentice writers in creative writing classes to the decisions of others” (129-130). Moreover, she guides her students toward descriptive, rather than prescriptive statements in workshop. Likewise, Mary Ann Cain

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teaches students an “Observation, Interpretation, and Evaluation (OIE) Method” of peer feedback, in which students must “spatialize” their comments and observations within the work to avoid unfounded statements of taste and aesthetic preferences and instead work toward useful observations that open up possibilities within the text (224-225).

All of these strategies help to shape and focus workshop feedback and discussion in a way that serves student needs and concerns. However, they fall short of addressing the issue of student uptake of written feedback, an area explored in the field of Composition and Rhetoric. How are our students reacting to, interpreting, and utilizing the feedback they receive? What are the possible connections between this feedback and their revision strategies? This presentation seeks to further explore what happens as well as what might be possible in the liminal space between how feedback is offered and how it is received.