On asking questions instead of offering suggestions

Writer Matthew Salesses discusses considering various models for writing workshops, the role of vulnerability in creative work, using empowering instead of critical language, and thinking about writing as a process rather than a product.

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As told to Michelle Lyn King, 2304 words.

Tags: <u>Writing</u>, <u>Process</u>, <u>Education</u>, <u>Success</u>, <u>Creative anxiety</u>, <u>Collaboration</u>.

Your book [_Craft in the Real World: Rethinking Fiction Writing and Workshopping_] came into my life after a bad workshop. It was one of those workshops where I left and wasn't sure I'd ever want to work on my novel again. [A few days later], I spoke to everyone individually and was able to ask questions, which was far more helpful. I was like, if only that were the workshop model. Then I read your book and realized, hey, it can be. When did you realize that something about the [writing] workshop wasn't working? That the traditional model isn't what is best for most writers?

As a student, there were certain things about workshop that really stood out to me. I remember we had this discussion where it was all about whether or not somebody in the story could ride a bike for as long as they had ridden the bike. The whole time I was thinking, "What? Like, why are we having this conversation?" I kept looking at the author, who was just hanging his head there. Afterwards, when he was able to ask questions, he said, "I did this bike ride. It was me. I'm the character. I literally did this bike ride." I thought, man this could have been cleared up in two seconds.

There were just a lot of moments when I felt that if we just let the author say something we could have a much more productive conversation. Yet when I went into the classroom, I did the same thing. I thought, I know this model, this is the model that I was taught to do. I just reproduced it in my first classroom.

It hit me very hard, much harder, actually, as an instructor than as a student. As a student, maybe it's the low position of power, but I felt like you just suffer through the bad parts, and you get as much as you can out of it. But as an instructor it was easy to see we could change things. We could do something else. And so I started by opening [the workshop] up to people. I would turn to the author and say, "Can you just tell us what you're trying to do here?" And that was helpful, but it still seemed like a bad model. Or maybe "bad model" is not totally fair, but not a useful model to everybody in the class.

And so I [started] asking people that I knew how they were running workshop. A lot of them said exactly the same thing that I was already doing, or slight modifications to it. But then <u>Nami Mun</u> said she teaches each workshop differently, and it completely blew my mind. I started to do workshops differently and everybody liked that much more. It makes sense [writers] would like a workshop more individualized to them. We started to do more and more of them that way, and fewer and fewer along a singular model.

How do you make sense of what feedback to apply to your own work? When you're getting feedback from a lot of different people, it can be so difficult to sort out what you should actually apply to your writing.

That's exactly why I think questions are so much more helpful. They encourage the author to create the solution for themselves. Or to imagine a solution for themselves. I think a really good suggestion is dangerous to a writer, because it's usually not exactly what the writer would do themselves. But it's so seductive, because it is a good suggestion. It gets in the way of [the writer] being able to imagine something that would fit even better.

Usually when I'm giving suggestions to my students, I am giving them purposefully terrible suggestions. Something really cliché or easy to turn to, so that they won't reproduce it. Instead [they can] use it as a jumping off point, to think about their own solutions. I do think a lot of this is solved by just asking the author questions.

How somebody can recover from a discouraging workshop?

I think a lot of it—and really the point the book is trying to make—a lot of it is about privilege. The people with the most privilege are the most able to recover from a bad workshop. The people with the least privilege, they have the least kind of headspace to be able to even understand that they need to recover from the workshop at all. Even bad workshops are still easier for people who have the ability to process them.

Something this book focuses on is vulnerability. What do you view as the role of vulnerability in writing?

There was a time period where students would ask, "How can I become a better writer faster?" I would think, "Uh, I don't know." [*laughs*] But I started to think maybe the thing that we could do was just be more comfortable with what we're putting on the page, and be more able to put things on the page that make us uncomfortable. Which isn't really about craft, in the sense that it's not about what we were taught craft is, which is making stylistic choices or plot choices. But it is about the art of being a writer.

In my experience, power dynamics in the workshop happen really fast. There's a sense of, who is "the best." I've been guilty of sending in the more polished story because I want to be thought of by my peers as good. I'm wondering if you have any thoughts on how to let go of this sort of ego when creating art.

Yeah, I think that's not on you at all. I've made all those exact same choices. The space has to feel like it's open. If it feels competitive, and it feels like you have to do that, who's not going to make that choice, right? Only somebody who has been taught many times that they are able to be vulnerable or able to escape the vulnerability that other people suffer from.

I think it starts with the instructor, and it starts with really opening the space up. When I started teaching younger undergraduates they would often turn in like half of a story. I was like, "Well, we can either workshop this or we can just say, 'No, you can't workshop this.'" I needed to make the workshop a space that could accommodate what they were turning in. I started to do things that would be more helpful for a student who's in a very early stage. It's more [about the] author talking at that point, and you're asking them a lot of questions about what they might do for the rest of the story, what they *wanted* to do with the story, why they felt they couldn't finish it. Often there's some kind of block there, or something they're avoiding. If the workshop space feels the way you're saying it is, I don't think most people are not going to want to turn in anything that makes them look bad.

You write in the intro that writing is power. I'm wondering how you help to empower your students, especially some of those younger students who may have never written a story before or never been published before. Which is not to say that publishing is linked to power, by the way. I want to make a distinction between publishing and writing.

Yeah. It is linked to power, though, right?

Yes. Yes, it is. I just mean that someone's writing is powerful even if it's never been published. I don't want to imply that it's not.

Oh, I see. Yeah. I was just doing workshop best practices with my students, so this is fresh in my mind. I was telling them [that] what we want to do is empower the writer. We want to try to make the writer feel like now they're going to go home and be really excited to go back to work on their story. I was telling them, you know, workshop is so overwhelming. You're sharing something really vulnerable, and you're listening to other people talk about it, and it's like baring your soul to them and then having them say things about it. The workshop's job should be to try to help you through that disempowering situation and make you feel more empowered to go back to work.

It's about words and phrasing, and how you're talking about the story, how you're imagining the story, what space it's in. I think on every level the words that we're using are dealing with power. And so the ways in which we empower our students also has to do with how we're talking about their work and the words we're using to talk about their work. The ways in which we're using empowering language rather than critical language.

Do you think it's valuable at all to talk about publishing in a workshop? I'm asking because sometimes I find talk about "should this work-in-progress be published" to be discouraging, like writing is only valuable if it's published.

Do we think of publishable as valuable, is that what you're saying?

Yes. That's the question.

I wonder if publishable makes it seem like you need external validation in order for something to be valuable.

I think it's a symptom of talking about work that we're doing as a product rather than as a process. I think if you're talking more about process, the publication part of it is less a way of evaluating a work, since you're talking about what decisions you're making rather than what's going to happen to the work afterward. I do think publication is a good thing to talk about students with, just because it's part of the reality of their lives. If they want to be writers in the sense that they can make some kind of living off it, then they're going to have to publish, right? So I think it is good to talk about the realities of the publishing world and the publishing industry. But I don't know if that's the best thing to talk about while you're workshopping. I think that's more of a separate conversation.

You map out some exercises in the book for revision, but I was hoping that you could speak about your own process with revision.

The first step is to try to make it seem as if you're reading somebody else's thing. Or if you're reading it in a different way than you've been able to think of it before. And so this might be one of those things, but I don't think it is. Just changing the font, or changing the format that you're reading in. Then I'm reading the whole thing over to make just quick marks. I then go back to and try to do larger level things, like adding scenes or trying to move things around to get it into the right structure.

[Revision] usually works best for me when I'm doing only two or three things at a time. Right now I'm revising a novel, and my agent seemed to want it to be longer. But what she means, I think, is to have more expansive scenes and more lived-in scenes. And so I'm trying to put more grounding in, and bring out setting more, and do things to make the scenes feel more, I don't know, substantial or something. After that, I'll try to do something else, because right now it's just becoming a kind of mess of longer scenes. I know on some level that I'm going to have to go back through it again and trim the same scenes down, or throw some of them out, and then work on something else. It helps me to kind of do it on a more targeted approach.

One of the best writing tips that I got from *Craft in the Real World* was that if you are bored reading a scene, it's not just because you wrote it or because you've read it a bunch of times. It's more likely that scene or chapter is boring, and needs to be completely reworked.

It's the best advice I've even got. It totally changed the way I was thinking about it, as an MFA student, you

know.

Yeah. I will say I read it and was like, *dammit*. I want to talk about some of the alternative workshops that you suggest, especially the critical response process that was developed by [the artist] <u>Liz Lerman</u>. The final step is suggestions or opinion time. What stood out to me was that this step only happens if the author gives permission for it to happen. I wanted to hear your thoughts on why it is so important for the author to give permission.

I think it's really helpful just to get the permission, even just on a level of what it signals. It signals you're doing something for this person, and if they don't want it to be done, then it's not for them.

The permission is like opening a door. You have this closed door, and sometimes it feels like when you're getting a suggestion that somebody is kicking it down and putting [a suggestion] right in front of you. But when you're giving permission, it's like you're opening the door and greeting them, and getting something that's given to you in a more polite and sociable manner.

Matthew Salesses Recommends:

5 K-drama recommendations:

<u>Goblin</u>

<u>Reply 1988</u>

<u>Sky Castle</u>

<u>Because This Is My First Life</u>

<u>Best Love</u>

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