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2018

Size matters: class numbers and the creative writing workshop

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Publication Details

Cosgrove, S. E. "Size matters: class numbers and the creative writing workshop." *Text* .Special Issue 51 (2018): 1-10.

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Keywords

class, matters:, workshop, size, writing, creative, numbers

Disciplines

Arts and Humanities | Law

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Biographical note:

Shady Cosgrove is an Associate Professor in Creative Writing at the University of Wollongong. Her books include *What the Ground Can't Hold* (Picador, 2013) and *She Played Elvis* (Allen and Unwin, 2009), which was shortlisted for the Australian Vogel Prize. Her shorter pieces have appeared in *Southerly*, *Overland*, *Antipodes*, *Best Australian Stories*, the *Sydney Morning Herald*, the *Melbourne Age*, as well as various Spineless Wonders publications.

Keywords:

creative writing – pedagogy – workshop – class size

Student satisfaction, rankings and class size

International survey research has long demonstrated the correlation of class size to undergraduate student satisfaction. Alexander Astin, Founding Director of the UCLA-based Higher Education Research Institute, gathered data from almost 25,000 students and 21,000 faculty, using 420 measures for his 1993 report *What Matters in College?* Astin determined that a 'low student-faculty ratio has a positive impact on student satisfaction in terms of relationships, quality of teaching and on virtually all other aspects of students' experience' (1993: 328-329). Statistician and education theorist Richard Light later surveyed 1600 students in *Making the Most of College* and found 'student after student brings up the importance of class size in his or her academic development. Not surprisingly, small-group tutorials, small seminars, and one-to-one supervision are, for many, their capstone experience' (2001: 9). Light goes on to say (45) that student satisfaction clearly corresponds to the number of small classes they have taken ('small' here meaning a class with fifteen or fewer students).

In an Australian creative writing context, fifteen students might seem like an impossible ideal but it is important to remember that size is a key factor in the U.S. News and World Report College Rankings, which can bear significantly on American university student numbers. American education analysts Reback Randall and Molly Alter documented the importance of these rankings, finding that 'changes in academic and quality-of-life reputations affect the number of applications received by a college and the academic competitiveness and geographic diversity of the ensuing incoming freshman class' (2014: abstract). Thus, in the American context, university rankings matter and smaller classes *directly* impact these rankings.

However, Australian universities do not have the same incentive to support smaller classes. While Australian rankings are dictated in part by 'graduate satisfaction' (University Reviews 2017: 1), there is no specific reference to class sizes in the criteria. This trend has also been observed by creative writing academic Lucy Neave: 'The increasing pressure on Australian academics to teach large numbers of undergraduates means that lecturers in this country are unable to manage the amount of reading and re-reading which is integral to many undergraduate composition classes in the U.S.' (2012: 3). In a time when education is global, and increasing revenues are being sought from overseas students, policies around student numbers and the creative writing classroom have the potential to affect the viability of our programs. But as this paper will discuss, that is only one concern of growing workshop student numbers.

The workshop model – is it worth fighting for?

In puzzling through this tension between increasing class sizes, the viability of the workshop model and our international context, I kept coming back to the undergraduate workshop model and asking this question: what would my institution, the University of Wollongong (UOW), lose if workshopping weren't central to our undergraduate creative writing majors? To answer this, I surveyed creative writing literature concerned with pedagogy and interviewed twenty-two 2017 UOW creative writing students enrolled in the third-year 'Major Project' subject (ethics approval: 2017/358). While a small data set, their answers were useful. I chose third-year students because they would have the most experience in workshopping, having completed workshop subjects in first-, second- and third-year with a variety of instructors. I also chose 'Major Project' students because they were either Bachelor of Creative Arts students or high-performing students from other degrees who had been

offered entry into the subject. That is, they were committed practitioners. This paper will incorporate both critical research from the discipline and these student reflections because they offer important data, and the student-perspective is often under-represented in pedagogical essays addressing the creative writing student experience.

Before I progress further, however, it is important to clarify my central term. There are many interpretations of what constitutes the workshop model, and teachers often adapt it as per teaching and learning styles, as creative writing academic Marcelle Freiman surmises (2012: 2) in her review of Dianne Donnelly's edited collection *Does the Writing Workshop Still Work?* While the workshop model 'appears to lend its name to almost every aspect our discipline's pedagogy' (Cowan 2012: 1) for the purposes herein, the undergraduate workshop model is one whereby students bring creative writing works-in-progress to class, read them aloud and receive feedback from teacher and peers. Usually this work is distributed beforehand to give teachers and students time to craft their feedback (especially important with larger classes). Feedback then begins with positive observations before shifting into the critical. During the feedback process, the author refrains from talking or 'answering back' any criticisms, though they are allowed a 'right of reply' at the end of the session. After the workshop experience, students have an opportunity to revise the work before submission.

THE WORKSHOP: Community

As Blythe and Sweet note in 'The Writing Community: A New Model for the Creative Writing Classroom', in the ideal workshop, 'the facilitator creates the perfect environment before receding like the Deists' god, the atmosphere is electric with positively charged commentary, and personal writing growth occurs; a community is built' (2008: 314). UOW student feedback supported the idea that the workshop model is important and can offer a strong sense of community. But interestingly, this sense of community was founded on critical engagement and creative process; it extended beyond their workshopping classes, and proved pivotal to their overall university learning experience. As one respondent stated,

It has been the most beneficial element of my bachelor's degree. There's no way my experience would've been the same without it and it is undeniable that the care and genuine desire to assist from intimate groups of peers is what has made the workshopping experience so positive.

This idea of the social as important to the learning experience came up repeatedly when students were asked what, specifically, they'd learned from workshopping. Other answers included the following:

- 'Networking.'
- 'Ability to run workshops outside of class.'
- 'Connections to build workshop groups beyond class.'
- 'Asking questions is a very effective way to help the workshopper and can be more palatable for them than, "This isn't working."'"

Workshopping gave students skills to establish connections outside the classroom. Importantly, this sociability did not detract from critical engagement; in fact, it often enhanced it. As another student noted,

The creative writing workshop is the backbone of the degree. It allows us reflection and practical development of theoretical skills as well as providing a space where we can build relationships between students as well as between students and teachers.

Other respondents noted specific things they learned via workshopping, including 'attention to detail', 'strategies for how to defeat problems' and 'how to splice setting with dialogue'. That is, workshopping provided a way to learn and critically engage with the craft of writing through community access to real-life examples.

One issue, though, with the in-built sociability of the workshop model is that student feedback is not always useful or appropriate. It can take dexterity on the part of the lecturer in managing a class. As creative writing pedagogue Lisa Tsui says,

To propagate useful discussion, instructors need to skilfully guide discussion and to facilitate student participation. This means knowing when to interject and when not to, how to pose thought-provoking questions, and what to do when students too readily reach consensus. (2002: 755)

In addition, students sometimes bring in delicate subject material to workshop. While the undergraduate workshop is emphatically not a place for self-help or therapy, it is not uncommon for students to bring in work that negotiates with themes as diverse as sexuality, death, rape and eating disorders. While the classroom emphasis is clearly on the work and not the writer, these kinds of themes can be emotionally charged, not just for the workshoppee but also for the other students in the classroom. It is important teachers pay attention to the micro-social indicators, both verbal (tone of voice, word choice) and non-verbal (body language and facial expressions), to intervene if necessary and to touch base with students after class. This becomes exponentially more difficult when student numbers increase, or, indeed, if the teacher is not present. To cope with increased numbers, one unnamed academic from a prominent university reported to me (with the wish of staying anonymous) she has been forced to set up simultaneous workshops, bouncing back and forth between them, and cannot guarantee feedback on every student's work. This also raises issues of equity – a student who is not able to receive lecturer feedback could well complain that they have been directly disadvantaged by the class size. That is, the pressure to teach bigger classes means it is impossible to follow best practice.

It is true that smaller classes may be more expensive in the short-term. However, workshopping students learn important skills for community-building that enable university learning to take place off-campus and without teachers present. For administrators interested in paring back student learning costs, workshopping can offer added value because it enables motivated students to be proactive with their learning, and added workshopping sessions do not affect university budgets.

THE WORKSHOP: Process – writing as rewriting

Major Project students also emphasised the workshop as a site for learning about process and the writer as rewriter. As one respondent wrote, 'Writing workshops have demonstrated to me the ability for work to evolve.' This is of particular importance for me as a teacher and I am not alone. Creative writer and pedagogue Lucy Neave underscores the importance of revision in her article 'Teaching Writing Process'. Prose revision, for her, 'usually implies some significant change to the fictional world that the writer has created ... Revising is also something that the writer does, rather than something that can be done externally, by an editor' (Neave 2012: 2). And this is critical – as being able to revise creative work is key to being a practising writer (Krauth 2006: 191). Or, as Neave posits, the 'development of draft prose, and response to comments by editors, are part of a fiction writer's job. Revision is what a writer does when a story is rejected' (Neave 2012: 2). By its very structure, the workshop model enforces the revision process that is fundamental to the publishing

process more generally. It also supports the idea that successful writing is achieved through revision and that our status as writers (both for students and teachers) is reached not through the act of writing but through rewriting.

But revision in the workshop is not a straightforward process. Students must firstly learn how to assess feedback, decide what feedback to take on, and then determine how to apply it to their work. If creative writing programs are training students to be better writers, then there has to be systems in place whereby students learn revision through the feedback/drafting process. When asked about the benefits of the workshop model, UOW students replied as follows:

- 'Learning how to take and give criticism and know neither is a personal attack.'
- 'Understanding different critical perspectives.'
- 'How to write and rewrite.'
- 'How to discuss my own work-in-progress publicly.'
- 'The power of reading aloud as an editing process.'

Class members mentioned the importance of writing as re-writing both on surveys, and during workshops – sometimes in a self-deprecating way, as if gearing themselves up for the hard work of revision that awaited them. If the work of creative writing teachers is to prepare students for writing beyond university, I am unsure what lesson could be more important. But this focus on process and revision affects teaching loads because 'writing courses that emphasize revision through multiple drafts ... require small class size so that teachers can read and comment on students' work over multiple drafts (Horning 2007: 14). Again, the pressure to take on larger classes directly affects the teacher's ability to commit to best practice. If classes become too large, there simply is not time to offer detailed feedback for every student.

THE WORKSHOP: Writing (and Workshopping) with an Audience

Workshopping is also important because it gives students an opportunity to 'go public' with their work. As Blythe and Sweet note, 'Like a focus group in advertising or politics, the workshop functions as a test market for beginning writers' (2008: 313). Neave expands: 'If a story is workshopped ... students will sense how their story was read, and measure their own expectations for the story against their peers' responses' (2012: 7). Often, too, it is through the process of reading aloud whereby the student can hear, and notice, flaws in their work. And sometimes, it is through the workshop that the student actually discerns what the work is about:

[S]tudents are not always fully conscious of what they wish to say when they begin writing. The writing process is a discovery process, which necessitates revision in order to clarify meaning and intent. Feedback is integral to the process because through comments on the part of the lecturer and peers, students realise what they have achieved in their essay, and what is still unclear or unresolved. (Neave 2012: 3)

In addition, it is through the writing workshop that students learn how to give and receive feedback, a skill that is useful well beyond the classroom. Critical focus has been given to the importance of receiving feedback for students (Neave 2012; Horning 2007; Blythe and Sweet 2008) but another important facet to the writing workshop is that students learn how to *give* feedback. They are coached by the teacher to be honest and critically engaged, while remembering they are addressing a fellow student. As Cowan states, workshopping is 'an experience that requires its

participants to be fully alert, fully alive to the moment ... and not only to form [relationships] but to be formed by them' (2012: 13).

This idea of being aware of your audience is linked, but separate, from the idea of creating a writing community as established above. Cowan emphasises the nature of the workshop as both a life and live event, taking place in-person, within a shared space, with the immediacy of live reactions. While reading a work aloud, to an audience, is a social act, it is also performative in the sense that the student is reading their work for an audience. While they did not always demonstrate this in class, when surveyed UOW students stated that they appreciated this focus on performing their work and reading for peers:

- 'Seeing people react to your work, engage with it, in real time is more valuable than I thought. Are they reading it/enjoying it how I want them to? Seeing the immediate emotional response.'
- 'The variety of perspectives always reveals something you may have never considered.'
- 'You need to workshop in order to know what you are/aren't conveying.'

The issue here is ensuring there is enough class time per student so that feedback is thorough and equitable. With too many students, workshops become rushed and quieter students tend to be forgotten in the push to ensure every student has workshopped. As Blythe and Sweet note, sometimes students' works 'are not given equal shrift' because 'the workshops are too large' (2008: 314). This issue of size and equity is critical: if student work isn't given equal shrift, then institutions fail in offering an equitable learning environment. Even if teachers are able to equally divide the classroom time, when workshops become too large, teachers simply do not have time to give in-depth feedback to every student. This is a very real problem as it threatens to undercut the very purpose of the workshop and undermine the discipline of creative writing's pedagogy. As composition pedagogue Alice Horning points out, it is difficult to be an effective teacher in a large class if the goal is to help 'students to develop their individual skills in critical thinking and writing' (2007: 16-17). Every student brings a different background, skill-set, learning style and engagement to the classroom, and trying to take each of these into account when numbers push twenty-five, or higher, can be difficult, if not impossible. As Horning says, 'It is difficult to learn students' names, much less understand their learning styles and engage them fully with the material in large groups' (Horning 2007: 17).

A workshop under threat

While UOW students offered positive feedback on the workshop model, it is far from perfect. Considerable work has focused on its complications and flaws (Barden 2008; Donnally 2010; Parkinson 2014; Boudinet 2015). And indeed, practicalities can often impede the best of pedagogical intentions. When asked about the least useful aspects of workshopping, UOW students offered less data. Twenty-three per cent of students said 'Nothing' while other comments fell predominantly into three categories: not enough time, not enough teacher feedback, and lack of engagement from other students. In relation to time, comments included the following:

- 'Too many students simply becomes a time problem ... when you need suggestions and discussion.'
- 'Too many students ... [leaves me] me with little to no feedback and I can feel like I'm wasting my time on others.'

- 'I felt I could've gotten a lot more out of the workshop if more time was available.'
- 'People can give advice that doesn't work/apply because they only get to read 500/1000 words.'
- 'Time limits can be detrimental.'

And while this paper has argued strongly regarding the benefits of the workshop model, the fact remains that smaller classes cost more to run and they are not absolutely necessary in producing strong writers. Yes, top writers such as Richard Ford, Michael Chabon, Alice Sebold, Ha Jim and Jhumpa Lahiri all have postgraduate qualifications in Creative Writing. However, Hannah Jane Parkinson's complaints about creative writing courses are not unfounded, and her arguments about classroom dynamics should be worrying for those of us committed to the discipline:

what if you find yourself in a group with people whose writing is incredibly dull to you? You still have to dedicate hours of your time to their work, when the selfish truth is that you're better off focusing on yours. (2014)

As one UOW Major Project student noted, this is no more fun when you're on the other side of that interaction: 'being matched with people who can't/won't engage with my form/content', this student stated, was one of the drawbacks of workshopping. Another respondent stated that they were irritated with 'reading work that hasn't been drafted enough on the writer's own time.' These comments demonstrate one of the fundamental difficulties with the workshop – a large part of a successful student workshopping experience, the classroom dynamic, is outside of the teacher's control. Because fellow students are offering feedback *on each other's creative work*, the convergence of personalities, and how that plays out with regards to written work, becomes more pressing than in other subjects. It is one thing to vehemently disagree with a peer about their reading of *Jane Eyre*. It is another to disagree with them about your own creative work.

According to Parkinson,

The best things I learned, I learned outside of university: going to poetry open-mic nights, bouncing ideas off friends, getting in touch with writers I admired and asking for their advice; reading, reading more; writing, writing more. I was doing all of this before I set foot in university. I already knew about the Writers' and Artists' Yearbook; I knew about double-spacing manuscripts. This kind of information can be readily found online, or by reading interviews and profiles in journals and newspapers, or just by asking writers themselves.

When all of that exists, joining a creative writing course seems redundant. I would often be frustrated by being given a handout of writing tips that I could have just Googled, say, or a photocopied excerpt of Stephen King's *On Writing*, which I had already read. (2014)

While it may be tempting to dismiss Parkinson's comments as one-off, Paul Mason's work in *Postcapitalism: A Guide to Our Future* suggests the information economy and accessibility of information via the internet has the potential to destabilise the neo-liberal agenda. That is, why would people pay for information they can receive for free on the internet? Mason uses the example of Wikipedia: 'The network makes it possible to organize production in a decentralized and collaborative way, utilizing neither the market nor management hierarchy' (2015: 129). Applied here, Mason's work begs the following question: with increasing networks available for workshopping and information on the craft of writing available online – and for free –

why would students pay for tertiary creative writing classes? Already this competition can be seen with websites offering free MOOCS, such as, '25 Free Online Courses to Improve Your Writing Skills' and 'Free Online Writing Courses'. As Mason states, the 'rise of information goods challenges marginalism at its very foundations because its basic assumption was scarcity, and information is abundant' (2015: 163). That is, once a lecture is filmed, it can be viewed any number of times with no additional cost: 'Information goods exist in potentially unlimited quantities and, when that is the case, their true marginal production cost is zero' (Mason 2015: 163).

The workshop, however, cannot be reproduced in potentially unlimited quantities because of the specificity of the feedback required. Yes, large numbers of writers have established workshop communities via the internet. However, universities can offer an in-person workshop model that promotes community with a writer-practitioner as a teacher. While aware of the drawbacks, creative writing pedagogue Patrick Bizzaro appreciates published writers as teachers because students can 'talk with writers actively engaged in finding solutions to the same kinds of problems in writing the students must solve for themselves' (Bizzaro and McClanahan 2007: 86). And interestingly, one hundred per cent of the Major Project respondents said that teacher feedback was important. As one student articulated,

This is what I'm here for, what I'm paying for. Their feedback is often outstanding and comes from someone experienced with writing. Feedback from students is great but there's always an element of 'Why should I trust their opinion?' that comes with it.

So not only is the workshop valuable for teaching students to establish in-person writing communities, to understand the process of revision, and to consider their audiences, the practising-writer workshop model also offers relevance in a time when the information economy has the potential to disrupt our current modes of practice. The workshop's relevance lies in its specific, professional feedback tailored to individual students, and class size is pivotal in retaining that relevance.

Arguing for class size, or what now?

So how do creative writing teachers state their case with university administrators? And what do we ask for? American pedagogues Farrell and Jensen argue that 'students will achieve more in classes of 15 or fewer' (2000: 316), and the Conference on College Composition and Communication (a group within the American National Council of Teachers of English who are focused on college writing) issued a position statement that classes should be capped at twenty students with a goal of limiting them to fifteen. William Conlogue, in 'Where I Teach', states that his university (Marywood University, in Pennsylvania, USA) advertises a student/faculty ratio of 13-to-one but that he often sees 'class sizes of twenty in writing courses' (2010: 390). Three academics (permanent and casual) at prominent Australian universities reported through private correspondence that eighteen would be their ideal but they'd all settle for twenty.

The important thing to emphasise here is that smaller creative writing classes are not simply about engendering a 'feel-good' experience. Manageable class sizes maintain our relevance in light of the information economy as outlined above and offer economic benefit to universities via retention rates. As Horning articulates, 'long-term studies have confirmed smaller classes have a positive impact on retention rates: students stand a stronger chance of finishing their degrees if there's a low student-

faculty ratio' (2007: 12). And as university administrators would know, it is easier to keep current students than to find new ones:

Public institutions ... need to be concerned about retention ... and about their overall performance as measured by the number of students who not only return from year to year, but actually complete degrees within a reasonable period of time. In these areas, again, there is evidence to support smaller classes, especially in writing. (Horning 2007: 22)

The next step, beyond the scope of this paper, could be to compile data on creative writing workshops, class sizes and student retention rates specific to the Australian context. Hard data from institutions across Australia that support Horning's assertions would give academics leverage when faced with one-on-one negotiations with administrators. But while we face these discussions individually – or with colleagues but at individual institutions – it is important to remember these issues affect the discipline at a national level. If we do not address the issue of increasing class sizes, the repercussions will affect the efficacy of the workshop itself, and, by extension, our very discipline. We could work together, under the auspices of the Australasian Association of Writing Programs, to adopt a position paper about recommended class sizes, considering the one issued by the American Conference on College Composition and Communication. However, this is only a stepping stone – we need to lobby the Australian University Rankings to make class size a determining factor for Australian rankings. This one shift would change the entire landscape for our discipline and the larger tertiary context. It would relieve the academic from being in the position of lone champion, arguing for class sizes that support best pedagogical practice in a larger education environment that seems increasingly focused on economic revenue. If smaller classes directly influenced university rankings, and university rankings directly influenced enrolments, administrators would take note. And instead of writing (and reading) papers like this, we could focus our attention on issues of pedagogy.

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