



The Writer's Compass

Turning the Next Page

Briefing 3: Writing in the Community: Making Workshops Work Drew Campbell

This briefing sheet is based on a session delivered by Drew Campbell at Turning the Next Page, an event for graduates of Scotland's Creative Writing Masters and PhD programmes and early career professional writers held at the CCA, Glasgow on Saturday 16 April 2011. Turning the Next Page is presented by The Writer's Compass (NAWE) in partnership with CCA, Glasgow Life, Gutter and Scottish Book Trust and funded by Creative Scotland.

About the author

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Delivering successful writing workshops

Much as we all dream of living off royalties from our highly praised back catalogue, delivering writing workshops in various community settings can be a vital part of a writer's income stream when the bestseller fails to materialise. This workshop is designed to involve you in thinking about good workshop practice – how postmodern is that? – and give tips on preparing, developing and delivering successful creative writing workshops of your own, adapting to different audiences, and building a portfolio of exercises that work for you.

What do you mean workshop?

If I had told my father I ran workshops for a living he'd have been chuffed I'd got myself a decent job as gaffer for a machine tool repair firm. Had I then explained I actually meant facilitating a discussion group or leading informal learning session he'd probably have looked at me like I'd turned into a giraffe. God knows what he'd have said if used it as a verb.

Nowadays we're all comfortable with the modern term but people may have different expectations and experiences of what does and doesn't make a successful workshop, so let me be clear on what I regard as the defining characteristic of a workshop: Participation. Participation is what sets workshops apart from traditional concepts of lectures or lessons because it is about involving people in a structured situation where everyone can contribute and learn from one another. That's why you're called participants.

Know your participants

More often than not you're dropped into a situation with a bunch of strangers who may or may not know each other. Some advance knowledge is essential – are you pitching at a primary five class of schoolchildren or an international gathering of published writers?

Whatever the situation it's good to start by:

- Introducing yourself
- Outlining the content of the workshop
- Asking your participants to introduce themselves with a brief sentence or two about why they came and what they hope to get out of it

This last bit is the key, of course. Do they know what they want? Do their expectations match what you have in mind? Are their aspirations realistic in the timeframe? All this information is vital to help you:

- put people at their ease
- manage expectations
- clarify workshop objectives
- gain a sense of the group dynamic

If they're all strangers there's likely to be some nervousness, especially as creative writing workshops often bring out ideas, ambitions or feelings not used to the light. When everyone there already knows everybody else then there may be even greater concern of exposing those thoughts, plus there may be added pressure for participants to remain within an accepted role – you don't need role play for people to play roles in a group. However, this workshop could be an unrepeatable opportunity for some to show themselves in a different light or to let people think of themselves in a different way. It's your job to facilitate that.

Shapes and sizes

You might have 2 people or 20 people or 200 people, anything from five-minute round robins or a one-off hour, a whole day or a series of two-hour sessions spread over weeks and

months. The essential point here is to ensure the client who has commissioned you to deliver the workshop has realistic objectives for the allotted time, space and number of participants. These should be negotiated and agreed well in advance – as should your fee which will, of course, reflect the work you put into the project. On that point, it's good to have an hourly and/or daily rate, possibly with an upper and lower scale depending on the client. The Scottish Book Trust's Live Literature funding has standard rates you can use as a guideline.

Shape and size and time and place all impact on **content**. Over the years I've run writing workshops for poetry, plays, short stories, novels and more in arts centres, community halls, churches, schools and universities where I've delivered to pensioners, blind and visually impaired people, business people, established writers, young offenders, primary and secondary kids. In all cases, the fundamental considerations are:

- What can we do in the allotted time?
- Is the venue suitable for purpose?
- How many will attend?
- What is the skills base of the group?

Those first three questions can usually be answered well enough for you to plan ahead, but the fourth is often trickier. A group of fourth year English pupils may seem a fairly obvious level to prepare for but if the school neglects to inform you – or you neglect to ask – that the class is composed of regular truants with little or no literacy skills then it's a different ball game. Yes, that's exactly what happened to me. On another occasion I made the mistake of launching straight into a poetry workshop only to discover four of the nine participants had a far more substantial knowledge and record of publishing than I did.

Making time at the start of a session to find out a little about the participants is always worthwhile, gives you time to think and can pay real dividends. Participation is a two way street so let people contribute. Just make sure it stays focused on the subject at hand.

Workshop tools

Your participants will have committed time and (possibly) money so they'll want to enjoy being part of a group experience; they'll want to share their stories and ideas, and they'll want to listen and be inspired by others. Often they'll want to be pushed a little, just a little, beyond their comfort zone, and learn something they didn't know before, perhaps about writing or, sometimes, about themselves. Whatever the make-up of the group and the objective of the workshop(s), it's good to have some stand-bys you know will work:

Automatic writing. Is an excellent technique for getting started. Get participants to close their eyes, be very still and listen to your voice as you outline a very loose, open scenario – walking through a forest at night, entering a house from childhood, putting on items of clothing, or whatever – then start writing. And they don't stop until you tell them, not for anything – they have to keep writing, no matter what. Just let whatever pictures are in their mind spill out. The object is to access that creative part of their brain, so spelling, grammar and even logic don't come into it. Set the atmosphere and they'll be in that near dreamlike state (theta waves) where we all start to think in imagery. Then, with a little warning and/or a countdown, they have to stop dead. Everyone should read out what they've written and hear a little positive feedback from you and from the group. For many this can be a revelation, and for most it will at the very least overcome inhibition about writing and sharing with others.

Visuals are another good way to open up ideas. I have a couple of folders full of pictures – unusual postcards, cut-outs from magazines, old photographs, adverts, calendars – stuff I’ve picked up over several years. Spreading them out on a table to let everyone to choose one from the dozens on offer has led to some fascinating poems and stories. Asking participants to meditate on the image, what attracted them to their choice, to think about what feelings it evokes, the memories it stirs and what stories lie behind will usually get creative juices flowing. More abstract approaches can work too; what the colours do, what the shapes are, the composition, what happens if you turn it upside down. It’s another way of unlocking that creative state, this time going through the back door with images instead of words.

Collaborations or breaking into smaller task groups can be a practical option for larger groups, and serve to break up comfortable (or uncomfortable) knots of participants. All groups have quiet and dominant members so it is helpful to change focus and orientation to shake up things if some are struggling to engage. It is good practice to change pace within workshops, especially if part of a series, and setting up collaborative working is a pretty radical change of pace for most. Small groups work particularly well in playwriting or scriptwriting workshops, but can be fun and spark things off in other settings too.

Structuring over a series of workshops requires different approaches. If this is a course scheduled to stretch over several weeks then the focus shifts to having participants write outwith sessions times. Every week should have space for each participant to share his/her response to the exercise set the previous week, with others encouraged to give constructive feedback – e.g. go round the group and ask each to say what they felt worked well and what needed more work in a piece. Sessions should build layer by layer and encourage participants to write; to **get into the habit of writing**. For example, a fiction writing course might start off writing monologues about characters created from a few random facts stating age, occupation, situation... and a secret. Week by week these monologues develop into stories, sometimes with other characters’ viewpoints on the situation, shaping a back story, or extrapolating what are the consequences. Feedback gives everyone a stake in the story so everyone will want to hear the final, polished versions. In other words the group will be writing for an audience they understand, so can develop the piece with that incentive.

Tick Tock

A time to hear, a time to speak / a time for the strong, a time for the weak / a time for beginning, a time to end / a time to gather strands together.

Apologies for paraphrasing the Book of Ecclesiastes (and the Byrds) but it kind of hits the notes for these notes:

- Be clear what you need to cover in the time given
- Leave space for participants to participate
- Have stand-by exercises and a range of materials
- Keep the group focused on the objectives, like chairing a meeting...and make sure you have time to sum things up before the let on the room expires.

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Appendix One: Good practice in workshop delivery and building business

These additional notes on the topics of good practice in the delivery of workshops and how to build business delivering workshops have been compiled by Drew Campbell and are based on the contributions and ideas of the participants of his two sessions on Making Workshops Work at Turning the Next Page, an event for graduates of Scotland's Creative Writing Masters and PhD programmes and early career professional writers held at the CCA, Glasgow on Saturday 16 April 2011.

Role of the leader

- The attitude and approach of the Workshop Leader / Facilitator is key to success. Be aware you hold a lot of power when setting the tone, creating an atmosphere of openness and respect, establishing the ground rules etc.
- Make it clear you are there for the participants and that they should be respectful of one another within the workshop.
- Participation and involvement should be your watchwords; strive to be as inclusive as possible to all those taking part.
- Look to build trust within the group and establish a supportive environment.

There was an interesting discussion on whether or not leaders should contribute and/or utilise their own work in workshops. In some situations this can be advantageous – establishing your credentials, forming the basis of an exercise, indicating willingness to share with the group etc. – but can risk working against the object of the workshops if it shifts focus from the group's produce or is viewed as self-indulgent. You have to judge what is appropriate to the brief and situation but if you decide to use or contribute your own work, ensure it is relevant and time limited, and that everyone is clear this is about enhancing the work of the group.

Ground rules, practice and feedback – some guidance

- Icebreakers – e.g. asking participants to come prepared with a piece of writing they admire; pairing participants to introduce one another – help put people at their ease and let people get to know one another, so try to make time for some.
- Reading out is an essential element. Ensure there is time and space for participants to read aloud the fruits of their labour.
- If someone doesn't have the skills or confidence to read out their own work, ask another group member to do it or do it yourself if you must. It's not a bad idea to mix up readers as it can be good for participants to hear others read out their work as it can mean listening more objectively.
- Emphasise listening to others' contributions is as important as reading and discussing your own – in workshops we all learn from one another.

- To encourage participants to frame their feedback constructively, ask every member of the group to comment on what they thought worked well / really enjoyed / was memorable, then to say what they thought didn't work so well / didn't understand / could be improved.
- Set the tone by leading off and / or summing up the comments. Be sensitive but honest in your responses; always find something constructive to say.
- Framing comments as questions can help stimulate discussion and reflection.
- Have a clear structure and timings, but allow flexibility and breathing space for when "moments" emerge.
- Be prepared to take participants to the edge of their comfort zones where they are stimulated by challenges. Watch a group does not become too cosy – everyone saying how much they like everything everyone reads – because it is probably not serving its purpose.
- Respect is crucial. Some may dislike subject matter but the focus should be on whether the piece works on its own terms, not the moral position it takes. However, use judgement and common sense if the subject matter (or handling of) is becoming overtly offensive to the group – e.g. someone getting off on reading out scenes of graphic violence, intentionally insulting people's race or sexuality, especially if directed at other individuals within the group.
- Intervene if a participant becomes offensive or overly dominant in their contributions. It is your responsibility to maintain a safe, balanced environment for all participants. At the very last resort, ask a person to leave if s/he is becoming so disruptive as to damage the functioning of the group.

Generating, promoting and pricing work

- The best marketing in the world is Word of Mouth. If you deliver good workshops people want you will build a good reputation and this will spread.
- You are a professional writer, delivering workshops is part of your income and career development and should be approached with equal professionalism – so be prepared, punctual, reliable and strive to give your best.
- Networking is about maintaining relationships so give feedback to employers / clients / commissioning and funding agents after a workshop or course.
- A simple, accessible website is a great shop window but it is unlikely to do much work on its own – you have to direct people to it. Mailshots are expensive and laborious, but (targeted) e-mailshots are simple and link back to your website.
- Also make sure you are listed on other appropriate websites wherever possible.
- Social networking is a new development which is still evolving. Facebook can be more proactive than a website but some feel there is etiquette between the social and professional, so a separate Facebook page for business might be advisable.
- Twitter can be a good way of keeping in touch with participants after the end of a workshop/course – which can lead to new business. (Unfortunately I'm not on Twitter or I would have asked everyone from Saturday to follow me! – Drew)
- SBT / Live Literature give guidelines for rates, an average of around £150 per hour. This, however, must be treated very flexibly – it will include preparation time, perhaps feedback and travelling time (though travel expenses should be separate). Delivering over a whole day or two days is different and would not be charged by the hour.

- Different rates for community and commercial customers are normal. Workshops to business may require specialist or additional preparation, so a charge akin to consultancy rates – £500 - £800 per day, depending on the amount of work and size of firm – may be more appropriate.

Delivering a workshop outside your repertoire

One final point was discussed that is worth considering: If you are asked to deliver a workshop outwith your previous experience, should you take it on?

It may depend on how far this potential commission will entail you stretching your skill set. Often it is only when asked to do something beyond what we usually do that we find out that we can. Such opportunities can help us to extend our range and create new openings for future business.

On the other hand, venturing into territory you know is not your forte – e.g. running a course on poetry composition when you don't know a limerick from a villanelle – is not professional. It is probably better to say thanks but no thanks and – if possible – recommend someone else you know would be better. It is a form of networking so be generous and trust the good will comes back to you in future.

Many thanks to the 40-plus participants from the morning and afternoon sessions at Turning the Next Page who all contributed so generously.

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