Work-shopping students’ writing can be traumatic on its own, but what happens when the content of the writing becomes the students’ own sorrow and grief? Planning writing workshops became one of the fundamental challenges I faced in designing “Writing to Heal,” a college writing class that encourages students to use their own writing to deal with loss.
The catalyst for designing this class was an automobile accident that resulted in the death of four promising female first-year students at Middlebury College. Supported by the College, my students and I began the 4 Divas Writing Project, that resulted in a commemorative booklet honoring the four young women and honoring, also, other losses that individuals in our group had suffered.
Seeing the benefits to students who participated in the project, I decided to move writing to heal into the academic classroom in a writing intensive course. In doing so, I faced the problem of how to conduct a writing workshop when the subject matter is the raw material of students' lives.
Creating the Workshop

The workshop process takes trust—trust in both the knowledge and the goodwill of others. Writing workshop participants need a buy in—a payoff for the hazard of exposing oneself, one’s words, to the kindness and the brainpower of others. To get my students to accept the benefits of the workshop process, I tell the truth—that in the actual workshop, students may or may not immediately learn something about their own writing. Right away, however, they will learn something about becoming an editor.

By beginning to see what their peer writers have achieved or not achieved, and by commenting on that, students begin to become good editors of others’ work, and finally become better editors of their own work. The ultimate goal for any writing workshop should not be simply to improve the quality of writing on one paper, but, instead, to improve the over-all quality of the writing of the author of that paper.

There is a point in any learning experience when the novice can recognize and comprehend a task that he or she cannot yet perform. A student can see that another student’s paper is lacking an argument—even if that same student lacks an argument in his or her own paper. The moment of in-betweenness, between understanding and mastery is the optimum moment for the writing workshop.
Workshop participants need to have confidence emotionally and intellectually in both the workshop process and in the workshop partners. To build this confidence, we must prepare workshop participants with knowledge about writing concepts, but even more importantly, we must give students clear expectations about what to expect in the workshop and the piece of writing to be work-shopped within it. If we see the learning curve as occurring primarily within the editor rather than within the writer, we see the necessity of the editor’s having to recognize not just whether a paper does or does not succeed, but more importantly how the paper meets or does not meet the expectations of the assignment. In writing workshops we must make clear the protocol of giving specific rather than general comments and of making positive suggestions for improvement rather than just voicing critical judgments. These two provisos encourage analytical thinking and civility—both essential components of the workshop process.

Faculty members should provide student editors with directions or worksheets that target specific writing areas such as thesis, argument, coherence, or paragraph development. The workshop focus can vary depending on the level of the class and the point at which a workshop occurs within the semester. In a course with five or six structured, in-class writing workshops, by the second or third workshop, students hum along in their groups making perceptive comments, so that even the writers begin to take away good advice.
Creating Trust

However, the challenge of conducting writing workshops in the “Writing to Heal” class arose not from the intellectual side of the writing workshop but from the emotional aspects surrounding the student work. I needed to create a safe atmosphere that did not violate the vulnerability of students beginning to share their thoughts, trauma, and memories. Through carefully sequenced writing assignments and frequent, shared in-class writing prompts, students become more comfortable both with sharing personal information and with sharing their written work. We begin almost every class session with a 10-15- writing prompt. Everyone present in the room writes and shares. After writing to the prompt, we all choose one of three options: read what we have written, describe what we feel about what we have written, or tell a joke. We all have to risk something, but we choose our own degree of risk in every class.
**Writing Prompts**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Love is</th>
<th>What does the word “healing” mean to you? Can you think of an image or metaphor for it? What are some things we need healing from?</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Childhood Memory</td>
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What kinds of things cause us to feel loss?

What do the words “opening up” mean to you?

“One does not love a place the less for having suffered in it, unless it has been all suffering, nothing but suffering.”

Agree or disagree?

“Life Changes in the Instant.”

There was a time . . . .

I FEAR

As the class listens to the responses to the writing prompts, we learn about each other, what we fear, what we love, whom we disappointed, who has disappointed us. Sometimes, the prompts stem from a passage from a work we have just read together. Some of the responses become the kernel of a longer personal essay or the inspiration for the final research project. Over the course of the semester, prompts move from safer topics to riskier ones. Responses to the prompts are never collected, never workshopped. In this part of the class, we are preparing for a writing workshop by not workshopping, not judging, and our individual responses to the writing prompts bind us to each other in empathy, concern and shared experiences.
Focusing the Workshop

Does the thesis commit the writer to a **single line of argument**?

Does the thesis predict the **major divisions** in the structure of the paper?

Is it **clear, direct and concise**?

Does the argument keep within the **boundary** set by the thesis?

Do the main points of each sentence follow logically from the thesis?

Do specific examples and details back up the main point of each paragraph?

While emotional trust builds through sharing responses to the writing prompts, intellectual trust builds as students begin critiquing each other’s analytical writing about the assigned texts in the class. D., a student in the class in 2006, thought that the paper writing and workshops

... allowed us to think and analyze writing as critical writers or readers. Discussing papers in class was very helpful as well as it gave us outside input and allowed us to get over the fear of sharing one's written work with others. (D. 2007)

Each workshop in the class, also, builds on the writing issues emphasized in the workshop before it.

Students read their papers aloud in groups of three or four, and the student editors begin responding to the specific workshop questions. In the first writing workshop, editors, starting with macro issues, begin to check for the organization, thesis, and argument of the paper. During the workshop, the peer writing tutor and I circle between the groups and push the writers and editors to the next level of thinking. We, also, encourage writers to speak out about what they want the workshop to provide—from help with a conclusion to help finding an elusive word for just the right spot. For those writers who have made strong arguments backed by examples and augmented by analysis, student editors begin to look at more micro issues and **style-level issues**, such as clarity, and cohesion.
Broadening the Workshop

Moving from Macro to Micro--
from Organization to Style


Clarity ~ MAKE IT CLEAR!
1. Do most subjects of sentences name the cast of characters?
2. Do strong, active verbs show how those characters act?
3. Are nominalizations (abstract nouns like discovery, movement, resistance) kept to a minimum? Instead, does the writer use the verb forms (resist, discover, move)?

Cohesion ~ BEGIN WELL!
Does the beginning of each sentence connect logically to the sentence before by:
1. Beginning with the last idea in the previous sentence, or
2. Using words that place the reader in time, or
3. Using words (moreover, therefore, on the other hand) that connect the reader to the previous idea, or

Emphasis ~ END WITH A BANG!
Are endings of sentences, paragraphs, but most importantly, your papers--strong?
Is the most important or the newest information at the end of a sentence?
Is the end of each sentence, paragraph, paper--spare and trim?
Does your conclusion end with a bang? Have you moved the information you want to stress (or newer, more difficult info) to the end?

With each succeeding writing workshop during the semester, I add additional writing issues, such as emphasis, coherence, and rearrangement. Many of the style issues I cover in workshops have developed from my reading of Joseph M. Williams’ book, Style: Toward Clarity and Grace. While many writing texts and handbooks deal very well with issues of organization and structure, few break down the issue of style as well as Williams. Through the workshop process, students became more knowledgeable about their writing, themselves, and each other. J., a student in the 2006 class, described it, thus:

Putting us in groups with other people who wrote about topics of a similar intensity was a great way for us to bond and for us to feel comfortable sharing our writing . . . (J., 2007)
As students grow as editors in a trusted environment, they improve their own writing by sharing it with classmates. The writing workshop works best as part of an orchestrated continuum to improve writing. Teaching can resemble conducting an orchestra, and the workshop, like flutes or oboes, should enter at the most appropriate moment. I situate the writing workshop after students complete a first draft of their papers, but before students do all of the following: meet with a peer writing tutor, write a second draft, meet with me, complete a third draft, and write a reflection about the changes they have made in the paper. The writing workshop plays a part in a three-draft process that challenges students to continue to revisit, review, and revise their writing.

In any writing course, but most especially in “Writing to Heal,” self-awareness and reflection prove key both to improvement in writing and, in this case, in recovery from trauma.
Analyzing the Personal

When [Brian] began writing . . . he was able to follow an idea to its logical conclusion . . . he began to focus on specific topics in an orderly manner . . . within 2½ weeks, he was focusing on his social and professional skills in order to assess his possibilities in alternate careers. (Pennebaker 95)

For J., the entire process allowed her “the time in between each [draft] to let it sit and then re-read and edit it for [her] self . . . so that it was fresh when [she] reread it (J. 2007). J.’s experience of slowing down and reflecting coincides with the observations of James Pennebaker in his book, Opening Up, the book that legitimized the writing to heal movement. Pennebaker narrates the case of Brian who was angry after losing his job. Pennebaker recommended that Brian write repeatedly about his loss, and repeated writing forced Brian to organize his thoughts and to slow down his thinking (Pennebaker 94-95). [When [Brian] began writing . . . he was able to follow an idea to its logical conclusion . . . he began to focus on specific topics in an orderly manner . . . within 2½ weeks, he was focusing on his social and professional skills in order to assess his possibilities in alternate careers. (Pennebaker 95)]

Another advantage from repeated writing about the same trauma that Pennebaker notes in Brian’s case and that of others is emotional detachment from the event, and Pennebaker suggests that as “emotional responses become less extreme” the ability to think clearly may improve (Pennebaker 95). The writing workshop, situated within the three-draft process begins the slowing down of thought that contributes to higher level analytical thinking and, in the case of personal essays, a better understanding of emotions and motivations.
Papers 1 & 2:  
**Personalizing the Analytical**

Compare the coping method or methods used by a character (or two characters) in *Monkeys* to the coping methods you or someone you know has employed.

1. Compare your circumstance to that of one or more of the characters in Jane Austen’s *Persuasion*.
2. . . . discuss your own circumstance of change in light of the two characters from *Persuasion* that you discuss.
3. Examine the role of words, books, and letters in *Persuasion*, and compare these occurrences to a time in your own life when spoken words, books, or letters played a pivotal role in your own life.

The gradual introduction of personal information into analytical papers helps students in the writing workshops become more comfortable sharing personal information in the context of a writing workshop. Students can write the first formal paper assigned in the course strictly as a literature paper, but one of the three paper topics contains the option of integrating the personal:

- **Compare the coping method or methods used by a character (or two characters) in *Monkeys* to the coping methods you or someone you know has employed.**

By the second paper, in all three topics students have to add the personal to their discussion of the text:

- **Compare your circumstance to that of one or more of the characters in Jane Austen’s *Persuasion*.**
- . . . discuss your own circumstance of change in light of the two characters from *Persuasion* that you discuss.
- Examine the role of words, books, and letters in *Persuasion*, and compare these occurrences to a time in your own life when spoken words, books, or letters played a pivotal role in your own life.

By the fourth paper, the personal essay, students are eager to write and share their own stories, and the writing workshop for that paper reflects the shift from analytical to personal.
Workshopping the Personal

1. **Subject**: What is the main subject of this essay?
2. **Slant**: How does the writer approach the subject? Does this slant interest you?
3. **Beginning**: Does the beginning grab your interest?
4. **Time and Space**: How does the writer orient the reader in time and space?
5. **Balance**: How are narrative, descriptive, expository/analytical elements used and balanced?
6. **Character**: If there are characters, are they used effectively?
7. **Detail**: Does the writer use details effectively, specifically? than in a general way? Enough—but not overkill?
8. **Center**: What is at the center of the essay? Is it material that is important to the subject and the slant?
9. **Form**: Are there mini pieces within the essay? Can you suggest a better order for the mini pieces?
10. **End**: Does the end of the essay satisfy you as a reader?
11. **Title**: After you have read the essay, consider the title. Does it still seem to fit?
12. **What’s left?** What information do you still want?

In this workshop, we rely on techniques we have discussed as we moved through fiction, poetry, and drama. Instead of focusing on argument, student editors focus on the characteristics of creative non-fiction in this fourth workshop. Students have waited weeks to write this paper, to tell not just a slice, but a whole story, and they are ready to look at their writing in different ways. Very occasionally, a student has material so sensitive or so raw that he or she is reluctant to bring that paper to workshop. In that case, I offer the student several options; first, I offer to let the student handpick the other student or students in the group, and second, I offer to have the student workshop an incomplete piece that leaves out the most difficult parts of the story, or the student can workshop one piece, and share with me an entirely different paper. In the last case, I would be the only reader and commenter of the piece. In the six years that I have been teaching the course, only one student has exercised the last option.
My tongue will tell the anger of my heart,
Or else my heart, concealing it, will break. . .
(Shakespeare)

One reason that students appear willing to share their intimate stories is the sense of trust we develop in class and in workshop; another reason is that I emphasize that I will never push them beyond their own comfort level in sharing. I would rather read an essay about the day a student lost her keys than to have that student regret sharing a problem she is not ready to face herself, let alone face to a group audience. Ironically, permitting students to hold back seems to encourage them to share more. Finally, the human impulse drives us to narrative, compels us to tell our stories, like Coleridge’s Ancient Mariner, who holds the wedding guest “with his glittering eye” (Coleridge line 3). We create narrative because we want to understand. Pennebaker suggests these reasons:

The mind torments itself thinking about unresolved and confusing issues. One reason that writing about traumas can be beneficial is that it is a powerful tool to discover meaning. Writing promotes self-understanding.
(Pennebaker 93)

The writing workshop provides a safe but disciplined space in which students can seek meaning and tell stories that must be heard.
The final workshop moves between the polarities of creativity and analysis as student writers and editors integrate the work of the semester. Despite the challenges and dangers of running writing workshops in a “Writing to Heal” class, the benefits to the students as writers and as editors far outweigh the disadvantages. By preparing students well with directions and clearly defined expectations and by creating an atmosphere of trust and empathy though shared reading and informal writing, I find that the writing workshop plays a vital role in the learning and healing that students experience by the end of the course.
Workshopping Lives:
Writing Workshop in a Writing to Heal Class

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