

# Reclaiming the "Wounded Storyteller": The Use of Peer Feedback as a Pedagogical Tool in Creative Life Writing

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Farrukh Akhtar looks at the use of student feedback within the creative writing workshop, with particular reference to life writing.

*Because stories can heal, the wounded healer and the wounded storyteller are not separate, but different aspects of the same figure.*  
(Frank 1995: xii)

## Abstract

This paper looks at the use of student feedback within the creative writing workshop, with particular reference to life writing. It is argued that preparing students for the peer review process, managing the way in which feedback is given and received and being mindful of the emotional impact of writing are keys areas of consideration.

Different types of feedback are presented. "Emergent feedback" is identified as a category that captures the accumulative impact of peer review, enabling holistic discussions about the craft of writing. Frank's (1995) concept of the "wounded storyteller" is applied to the emotional impact of life writing. Suggestions are made for managing the process for individual students and within the curriculum as a whole.

**Keywords:** life writing, peer feedback, emergent feedback

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## Introduction

This paper looks at the use of student-to-student feedback in creative writing courses within higher education institutions (HEIs), with specific reference to life writing. Peer review and feedback form the bedrock of most creative writing workshops. Students, who may have been used to writing only for themselves, build up an awareness of how others respond to their writing. Over time, this informs them about the extent to which their writing has developed (Drew et al. 2012). Students sharing their creative writing make for innovative and stimulating discussions. This increases the level of their engagement and the likelihood of deeper learning taking place.

Student peer and self assessment are established tools to enhance deep learning (Boud 1995; Falchikov 2005). Lamberg (1980) defines student feedback as "information on performance". This paper looks at peer feedback (from students, to students). This is closely linked to self and peer assessment. It is difficult to provide feedback without first coming to some kind of assessment on a piece of work. Self and peer assessment can be summative and formative. Only the latter is considered here.

This paper discusses some of the more problematic aspects of peer feedback and is based on my recent experience as a student (who has just completed a postgraduate course in creative writing, focusing on life writing). However, I am also an educator (a senior lecturer in social work). The reflections presented are as a result of seeing through both of these lenses.

Different aspects of the process will be discussed: preparing students for the peer review process, managing the way in which feedback is given and received and being mindful of the emotional impact of writing.

It is important to note the views presented may not necessarily reflect those of other students on my course and are in no way any kind of criticism of the course or the staff teaching on it (who I found to be seminal experts in their fields, professional in outlook and generous of their support and time). These observations are offered to aid further thinking around the area of student feedback, its strengths and limitations as a pedagogical tool.

### **Preparing students for the peer review process**

On starting the course, I was disconcerted to find that an important aspect of it was giving and receiving feedback on fellow students' writing. We were informed of this in a matter of fact way. I remember feeling baffled at the lack of explanation and preparation. There had been no time set aside for us as a group to consider the challenge of what we had just been asked to do. There was no discussion about what feedback was, and how we were going to do it. I had a vague sense of being thrown in at the deep end, and of not knowing where I was meant to be swimming to. I felt terrified, exposed, and was aware that others felt similarly. There was a paradoxical sense, on the one hand, of feeling impotent at having my peers pushed into commenting on my writing, and at the same time a cruel sense of omnipotence, at the feedback that I could give in return. I felt that I had paid my fees and had inadvertently consented to being persecuted for two years. I found myself shutting down.

(Author's personal reflections)

The terror of moving from a place where writing has been an essentially private act to one where it is not only seen by one's peers, but is the subject of their enquiry, cannot be over-estimated. Most students perceive the act of writing as an emotional one (Light 2002) so it follows that a key aspect of preparing students for peer feedback is finding ways to enable them to manage their anxiety and so optimize the conditions in which learning can take place (Vygotsky 1978).

Oosta and Hoatlin's (2011) research in this area confirms my experiences: that students initially receiving feedback on their work often experience it as negative and unhelpful, leading to it being discarded. Oosta and Hoatlin differentiate between emotive, or "reaction-based" comments and those that are technique-based. They found that as proficiency in writing increased, so did the move towards the latter.

It would seem reasonable for students to seek clarity around what is being expected of them, for criteria around what to look for when reading pieces of work (Brown & Glasner 1999). Drew et al. (2012) offer helpful suggestions on how to do this. One is to show students what a dysfunctional workshop looks like (by showing them a clip from the film *Wonder Boys*) and inviting a discussion around the way appropriate feedback could be given.

Dawson (2009) shares a piece of her own unfinished work at the beginning of a course to model to students what is being asked of them. Not all educators will feel comfortable in assuming such a position, but the example demonstrates the importance of ensuring that students are clear of what is being asked and that it is an organic, thinking process, of genuine exploration.

Setting ground rules can seem like stating the obvious but doing so provides a set of concrete expectations around behaviour: pointing out that feedback will be on a *draft* piece of writing, is not a reflection of the person writing it, or their abilities as a writer; that offensive language is unacceptable, the challenge being to give respectful, yet authentic feedback.

Drew et al. (2012) go on to share "models of effective commentary" – excerpts of strong pieces of previous student feedback. Alongside this, it may be helpful to provide exercises that enable students to reflect on their emotive response to a piece and translate it into a more helpful form of feedback. For example, rather than saying a piece is boring, how could this be framed into something more constructive?

Ensuring students take time to develop an awareness of the relevant terrain before they begin any actual work together may help to lower levels of anxiety and increase group cohesion (Brown and Knight 1994). An important aspect of this could be for them to develop a shared understanding of what feedback is, and the different ways in which it can be done. This is discussed in the next section.

### **Managing the way in which feedback is given and received**

I observed the class moving beyond simple formulaic notions of feedback to a more complex process that included picking up on grammatical errors, asking for clarification around sentences/paragraphs that were confusing to read or did not make sense to the reader, giving subjective/emotional reactions; positive feedback; reactions on what had worked well or not in a piece. After that, there were more critical and technical discussions about the piece (structure, point of view etc.). Finally, some of the pieces led to a more open and organic discussion about the potential of the piece and how it could evolve.

(Author's personal reflections)

In my view, an open discussion about the different types of feedback would have provided a helpful framework within which to articulate our explorations.

Ziegler (1989), for example, offers four distinct categories of feedback:

- Reactive: where students give abstract reactions to a piece
- Prescriptive: suggesting specific changes
- Descriptive: offering a more concrete description of what a piece is doing
- Collaborative: offering such dramatic changes that the piece no longer remains the work of the original author

These categories build well on Oosta and Hoatlin's (2011) binary of reaction-based versus technique-based feedback. Zieglar also suggests the category of "No feedback", where the writer comes up with their own ideas as a result of sharing a piece with others, presumably because the feedback received was not helpful.

A third framework, Klassen's (2004, cited in Akhtar 2012) initially appears to replicate Zieglar's categories, but on closer inspection, offers some useful clarification. Klassen differentiates between the following types of feedback:

Red Pen: editing, correcting or "fixing" another's writing by offering suggestions.

Back Pat: complimenting the writer's efforts.

Analysis: interpreting the different layers of meaning in the writing.

Seed Gathering: highlighting and sharing what works well from the reader's perspective.

Power Notes: feeding back the personal impact the writing has had on the reader.

The category of "red pen" is a helpful addition, especially within HEIs where it is a requirement to focus on grammar and appropriate levels of written English, as well as feeding back on the technique-based aspects of a piece. Being able to discuss "red pens" as a type of feedback provides an opportunity to discuss exactly what "red pen" feedback students would find helpful to give and receive. For example:

Some students in my class acknowledged their spelling and/or grammar was poor and wanted their peers to correct it. When I am marking work as an educator, I highlight bad grammar, and ask the student to review it. As a student, I felt it was not my job to correct another student's grammar. In my experience, doing this simply leads to students accepting changes without thinking about them, or improving their skills.

(Author's personal reflections)

In addition, "seed gathering" – highlighting words or sentences that are especially effective – can be affirming to students and provide a helpful balance, especially if a piece requires substantial re-writing. Similarly "power notes" where the reviewer feeds back on the personal impact of the piece (e.g. "your writing about death reminded me of when my mother died and how vulnerable I was at that time...") can provide vital feedback to the writer about the emotional breadth and depth of their writing and the different ways it can be interpreted by readers.

When the peer feedback process works well, it can be a potent learning tool. I suggest adding another type of feedback to the above categories: "emergent

feedback". This refers to the collective impact on the writer (of written feedback, one-to-one and group dialogue). I observed an organic process where an individual's feedback took on a different quality when it was thrown into the collective pot, and especially if it was subject to further mulling over. A thought could trigger another, then another – a freefall of ideas. The writer was transformed by the process, seeing the technicolour possibilities of their piece, warts and all.

Emergent feedback is different from the collaborative feedback cited by Ziegler (1989) or the developmental editing carried out routinely by educators (although the latter contributes to the feedback in the collective "pot" from which emergent feedback stems). It frees the writer to make editorial choices about the direction they wish to take in a piece and to explore avenues they may not have considered if left to their own devices. It encapsulates all the strengths of the creative writing workshop method.

There are two further suggestions, offered by Drew et al. (2012) around managing the way feedback is given and received. The first is to focus on a specific aspect of writing and to ask students to only feedback on that aspect. By keeping learning bite-sized, educators can ensure it is kept digestible. The second is to offer a post-workshop tutorial to discuss what editorial decisions a student has made in light of the feedback received. Not all educators will have the resources to do this.

Another aspect of managing feedback is the educator's awareness of perceived inequalities in the student group and how these are acknowledged and worked with.

As a group norm and consensus of practice was established, my anxiety shifted to whether or not my feedback was "good enough". I observed that a student's response to receiving feedback was dependent on a number of complex and interdependent factors. Many of these rose from the rough, unspoken pecking order that soon emerged; students placing each other into broad categories of competence: strong, mediocre or weak. As each student was giving and receiving feedback from others, they were rating themselves, as well as everyone else.

(Author's personal reflections)

The concept of "reputational lenses" is relevant here, as described by Hattie and Timperley (2007), who argue that students generate certain biases in an attempt to make sense of their location in relation to others. Students' estimations of themselves may be helpful, such as "I'm determined to move from being a mediocre to a good student", or they may be unhelpful, or worse, destructive: "I'm the weakest student. I should give up."

I observed that the way a student responded to peer feedback seemed dependent on:

- Their relationship with the student giving them feedback (they were more likely to accept positive or negative feedback from a student they got on well with or respected).
- Their own emotional state at the time. I will discuss this further in the next section.

- The language used by the giver of feedback and the level of their emotional intelligence. (As expected, I observed a range of skills in this area. Some students stuck to providing safe, positive feedback only. Others managed to express important but difficult concepts sensitively. One or two were blunt and/or rude at times.)
- How the individual feedback fitted in with the overall consensus of feedback. (It was difficult to ignore an issue if several students named it, e.g. that the current structure of the piece didn't work.)
- The extent to which a student experienced an individual, or the group as a whole, as grasping the essence of their piece. (There were times when I felt that an individual, or the whole class were completely on the same wavelength as me and what I was trying to achieve, and similarly times when I felt that the whole point of the piece had been missed. Interestingly, this was not related to whether the feedback was positive or not.)

A student group can take on a life of its own. Where educators locate themselves in this process is crucial, as skilled facilitation can re-frame careless student feedback, thereby minimizing perceived inequalities within the student group and maximizing the potential of all students. Sachs and Parsell (2014) highlight the pros and cons of adopting a formal top-down approach or an informal bottom-up one. I postulate that for most educators, this is a complex, organic and ongoing area of professional development. It leads to a related area, the way in which they manage the emotional impact of writing on students.

### **Being mindful of the emotional impact of writing**

When a peer group functions well, it can be a place of invaluable feedback; nurturing the beginning writer with an abundance of constructive comments that act as a catalyst to their budding skills. However, there is scope for students to inadvertently experience more negative reactions and, I would go as far as to say, trauma. Writing is personal. If writing is seen as an emotional act (Light 2002) or even a spiritual exercise (Schneider 2013), then students doing life writing are not simply giving feedback on creative writing. They are giving feedback on their life's writing.

Many of the pieces were personally exposing. There were different points at which we were all distressed and not in a place to hear the most reasonable or carefully worded feedback.

(Author's personal reflections)

I use myself as an example to illustrate this point. I was writing a memoir on living with schizophrenia. At times, delving into my past was painful, leaving me feeling extremely vulnerable. I found that my usual defences dissolved. I was left without a way of protecting myself against the most innocent of comments. (I lost several nights sleep when a student made an off-the-cuff remark about the life span of schizophrenics, a comment that ordinarily would have had no impact on me.)

I was in the fortunate position of liking, and respecting every one of the students in my class. However, I found that in this heightened emotional state, any kind of

feedback was unbearable. I have included a few excerpts from my diary at the time to illustrate this:

*I am aware of feeling despondent, hurt and misunderstood in my interactions with the MA writing group. It seems that there is no basis for good behaviour – we are all so disparate. I begin to find common ground and enter into some kind of relationship with them, only to be foiled by some stupid misunderstanding. There are constant misses in communication. It feels as if there is genuine warmth and good will in the group. Then the feedback of each other's work starts and the shutters come down. The expectation – actually, the requirement – that students share and discuss their writing makes the process unbearable. There has to be a better way of giving and receiving feedback.*

(From the author's diary)

There is the acknowledgement that it is not simply other students, or their feedback, but my own vulnerability that is contributing to the situation:

*Spending time at home getting in touch with my own inadequacy is also unsettling. I know I have to work through this. There is nothing else for it...*

(From the author's diary)

I go on to reflect on a conversation I had with a friend:

*We discussed how writing brings out your core issues. How can I tackle these? Is there a way in which I can speak my own truth, and yet transcend the hostilities in class, and within myself, to the part of me that can write pure gold?*

(From the author's diary)

I had to not only revisit the troubled past, but to dwell there a while, try walking about in the shadows of different people, question my account of reality, check out how different versions fitted in with my overall memory. All of these journeys took time. Once in a while, I resurfaced to draw breath and then took the plunge again. It was not only relationships on the course that were tested. I had minimal contact with my family and withdrew from seeing friends. It was not fair to subject them to the space I was in, and I was in no frame of mind to make sense of it.

As well as revisiting my troubled past, there was the added dimension of taking events, feelings and crafting them into a literary form. There were times when the worst fears about my writing were confirmed. I was unable to turn an emotional jumble of words into anything worth reading. I was not good enough.

Returning to my diary, a day or so later, I was able to build on the above reflections in a way I found incredibly helpful:

*It has just occurred to me that the reason we are all struggling to connect to each other is to do with the types of tale we want to tell.*

*We are all "wounded storytellers". The narratives we need to tell are getting in the way of our relationships. It would be interesting to see the different narratives that individuals identify with. Is there a clash between a "restitution narrative" and a "quest narrative" maybe?*

(From the author's diary)

The mention of the "wounded storyteller" is a reference to Frank (1995). He presents a lifetime of work using a narrative approach to research the stories of the seriously ill. His comments about them have an eerie resonance with life writers:

As wounded, people may be cared for, but as storytellers, they care for others. The ill and all those who suffer can also be healers. Their injuries become the source of potency of their stories. Through their stories, the ill create empathic bonds between themselves and their listeners ... Because stories can heal, the wounded healer and the wounded storyteller are not separate, but different aspects of the same figure.

(Frank 1995: xii)

For writers, especially life writers, to move beyond the rawness of their material, they need to process experiences (their own and others') and transcend them. It was tremendously affirming for me to realize that the pain was part of the process and not a symptom of me breaking down. It was reassuring to grasp that the challenge was not only to reclaim my sanity, but to use that pain in a way that could connect others to the story. As a social worker, I already related to the idea of the wounded healer, but here was an opportunity to reclaim the wounded storyteller. And by connecting to her, I was able to connect to my peers as also being the same.

Frank (1995) defines three different types of narrative; the restitution narrative (where the aim of a journey is to get back to where one started from); the chaos narrative (where a journey becomes too painful and confusing to unravel) and the quest narrative (where suffering is met head on and ultimately transforms the person). There will be others.

Acknowledging the wounded storyteller makes it possible for conversations to begin.

It may be helpful for a student to consider what kind of narrative she identifies with. Just naming it means that she has already taken a step away from it and may be more willing to look at a situation or her written work differently. She has acknowledged she is writing a story. She is the story teller, not the story.

My tutor was an invaluable source of support in this regard. However, this highlights the emotional burden placed on educators. It may be prudent to re-examine existing systems of support (for example buddy pairs or small groups of three to four who meet regularly) to look specifically at this aspect of student experience. Creating space in the curriculum acknowledges that students' emotional well-being and therefore the totality of their learning is taken seriously.

Another type of negative emotional reaction, and one that may not be so easy to deal with, is withdrawal from the student group.

I observed this in different ways. The simplest was absenting oneself from class.

As a student, it was frustrating when colleagues failed to turn up on a regular basis, especially to important events. I was concerned for them but also experienced their absence as an acute form of passive aggression. They were letting us know that they were not OK. This undoubtedly impacted on my learning. I didn't know if I had said or done anything to contribute to their experience, and in turn missed out on valuable feedback that could have helped me.

(Author's personal reflections)

Perhaps it is inevitable that in a heightened emotional state, students withdraw. Added to the sense of not being understood, or of feeling persecuted by others, two students mentioned to me how suicidal they felt, at times, through the emotional demands of connecting with material from their past.

Not all withdrawals were about negative feedback. There was at least one example of a student who was initially given a lot of praise and positive feedback on the excellence of their writing and helpfulness of their feedback. Paradoxically, this also led to their complete withdrawal from the student group. My initial conjectures about this were that the student was perhaps left feeling that there was little the group could offer them.

On further reflection, I wonder if it was overwhelming to have such an affirmation about one's writing. For example:

I recall an incident in which I received exquisite feedback on a piece I had written. I found this in some ways an equally disorientating experience as receiving very negative feedback. I felt I had no way of receiving it, of processing it. I momentarily lost my identity as the weak-mediocre student and felt unable to claim the "making good progress" label. I was so used to having my defences on red alert, that it felt too dangerous to switch them off to receive this praise.

(Author's personal reflections)

Hattie and Timperleys' (2007) research about the possible negative impact of praise is noteworthy and relevant to this discussion. They found that students are more likely to interpret praise through their "reputational lenses" as a sign that they are perceived as weak students and that a lower bar had been set for them.

One way to tackle this may be to do an exercise that gets students to reflect on their learning styles before they begin the process of peer feedback (Honey & Mumford 2006). This would provide a language to enable discussions in small groups, or with their tutor, encouraging a more active engagement with limiting beliefs and so generating an opportunity for dialogue if the student is considering withdrawing – or actually withdraws – from their peer group.

If peer feedback is a central part of the creative writing endeavour, a key challenge is to ensure it is given and received within a genuine spirit of inquiry. Every student

takes a leap of faith by enrolling on a course. As an educator, it has been humbling to experience what I ask students to do every day. The leap of faith required in the process of peer feedback cannot be over-estimated. It is our responsibility as educators to ensure that students are sufficiently prepared and have a clear enough understanding of the task.

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