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A Freirian reading of online writing workshops

Abstract
Online writing workshops provide educational spaces within which writers can learn and refine their craft. In order to better understand the dialogic mechanisms behind that learning, this paper examines ways in which online writing workshops might be described as functioning in manners akin to Freirian culture circles. This paper identifies several key characteristics that define Paulo Freire's concept of the culture circle. It compares these characteristics to the structure of and interactive practices within an online writing workshop. It unpacks some of Freire's ideas about codification and decodification of situated problems and about achieving critical consciousness, and examines how exemplars of this can be found in online writing workshops.
Keywords: Freire, pedagogy, creative writing

Introduction

'There are three rules for writing a novel,' Somerset Maugham said. 'Unfortunately no one knows what they are.'

As a writer and teacher of creative writing, I'm extremely conscious of Maugham's (apocryphal) point and the questions it raises. Authors are often fond of penning their own 'rules' for writing. Elmore Leonard, George Orwell, et. al., have all had a go; my personal favourites are Kerouac's which are nonsensical enough to be immaculate. That said, at the end of the day I think anyone who has wobbled the tightrope of the page realises that writers' rules provide flimsy nets at best. We learn our skills precariously.

And so, the educator in me remains preoccupied with ancient questions like: how do writers learn their craft? If the craft is, indeed, learned – in what ways can it be taught? What kinds of educational spaces are conducive to this learning?

These questions remain interesting, I believe, because their answers are complex and indeterminate and in a state of constant motion as learning environments change. I find myself arriving at answers, in part, subjectively. In mulling possible answers over, I'm led to examine the ways my own writing practice has formed. Since my boyhood I've always written and, like Moliere (who compared writing with prostitution), at first I did it for love, then for a few friends, and finally for money. In hindsight, I believe that I've learned as much off the page as on it. The writing itself is a teacher, but I am blind to my own mistakes (or else I would not make them) and so workshopping my writing with my peers has long been part of my practice.

This kind of learning-through-interaction is a well understood phenomenon. The history of writing is a history of writing gangs – the Inklings, the Bloomsbury Group, the Parisian Modernists, even McSweeney's. Vygotsky (1978) is one educational theorist whose framework argues that social interaction plays a critical role in learning processes. Lave and Wenger (1990) follow on from Vygotsky and call the process of learning through peer interaction in adult, profession-oriented (such as writers') groups *situated learning* inside a *community of practice*. Any number of other theorists argue that social interaction is an integral part of the learning process (Piaget 1954; Papert 1990; Cobb 1994; Kafai & Resnick 1996) or that learning takes place in the social sphere (Cunningham 1996). Dewey (1929) liked the idea of democratic learning. Socrates was fond of dialogue.

It goes without saying that the ways in which we ('we' in this context being privileged, wealthy and with access to technology) interact are in a state of massive flux as the digital age moves from dawn to breakfast. My own answers to the ideas of dialogic spaces for writers have been shaped, and continue to be, by this. I'm a nerd (or 'digital native' if you prefer) from way back. My first modem-enabled computer had less memory than it takes to store a mobile phone ring tone today, and although I was talking with others on what would later be called the Internet, that word did not exist for us until much later (still being the vernacular of cold warrior military types).

As such, my first encounter with a community of practice for writers took place online. In 1994 I joined the Internet Writers' Workshop (IWW), hosted via a listserv at Penn State University, with the goal of workshopping a stage play I'd written.

I chose an internet workshop rather than a face-to-face one for several reasons. Firstly, as I have mentioned, I was familiar with bulletin board systems and email. Secondly, the flexibility of an online workshop appealed as I was working long hours and could participate in my own home at whatever time suited me. I think what really appealed to me, however, was more personal. I'd never really shown my writing to other people, and had certainly never had it formally critiqued. I was afraid of what my readers would say. It would feel much less embarrassing if my unmasking-as-a-fraud took place in a virtual environment, with strangers whom I'd never meet, than around a table at a local writers' group.

Over the course of a month, I workshopped my stage play with a dozen or so other script writers from around the world, most of whom were vastly more experienced than me. I found the process both rewarding and informative. The stage play ('The Open Door') went on to win the Queensland Theatre Company's young playwright of the year award.

In the almost 20 years since that time, I've remained an active member of various online writing workshops. I've submitted numerous works to the IWW for critique and have, I believe, learned a great deal about the craft and art of writing as a result of that critical dialogue with my peers. I've also noted that the basic pedagogic characteristics of these spaces have not notably shifted over that time. The tools have changed, of course. Facebook groups and Drupal or Python-based web 2.0 communities have replaced LiveJournal which replaced newsgroups, which replaced BBS communities. But the core characteristics and dynamics of these spaces, when used by writers to share and critique work, has remained remarkably consistent. Furthermore, these characteristics and dynamics are well suited to the kinds of vulnerability I was feeling as an emergent writer – intuited by me at that time, and more explicitly understood since.

This paper seeks to reflect on ways in which the informal, asynchronous educational space of online workshops functions as a 'culture circle' within the frame of Freirian pedagogy. Contemporary digital spaces for writers bear remarkable similarities not only with their digital forbearers, but also with older, democratic, physical educational spaces. I think that layering older educational theorists over contemporary digital spaces reveals interesting philosophical continuities, which is why I choose this approach.

The Culture Circle

The culture circle (*circulo de cultura*) was the educational space that Brazilian educator Paulo Freire developed in the 1960s as a vehicle for adult literacy education in the poorest parts of Brazil. The culture circle is a model that exemplifies his ideas and how they can be practically implemented.

Freire hailed the culture circle as a 'new institution of popular culture' and described its design and goals thus:

> Instead of a teacher, we had a coordinator; instead of lectures, dialogue; instead of pupils, group participants; instead of alienating syllabi, compact programs that were "broken down" and "codified" into learning units.
> In culture circles, we attempted through group debate either to clarify situations or to seek action arising from that clarification. The topics for these debates were offered to us by the groups themselves. (Freire 1976: 42)

More recent definitions of Freire's culture circle include:

> a discussion group in which educators use representations and themes from learners' everyday lives to initiate critical dialogue regarding the various factors that contribute to the real material, social, and political contexts in which the learners are embedded. Through dialogue and collective reflection, the group of learners transforms their various observations and opinions into critical knowledge. (Stevens 2011)

Interestingly, the concept and term 'educator' still remains both ambient and at times explicit in much of Freire's early writings, even though his ideals seem to have friction with this idea. In the definition of culture circle that Freire gives above, a syllabus is still clearly present in his idea of delivered 'compact programs'.

This problem has not gone unnoticed by critics of Freire's pedagogy who argue that while his initial positioning might be non-formal, the educational encounters he describes remain formal (Torres 1993: 127). How this impacts on the Freirian ideal of attaining critical knowledge through dialogue is self-evident: where there is a curriculum, there are educational agendas that may attempt to channel dialogue rather than liberate it. This limits the type and kind of critical knowledge that might arise.

The primary extension of Freire's ideas to account for this limitation is the notion of an emergent curriculum (Auerbach 1992), where learners identify their own problems and issues and seek their own solutions. An emergent curriculum, driven by the learners themselves, allows for the absence of an expert, a teacher. Rather, participants can facilitate their own discussions and activities and learn alongside each other.

This is a logical refinement of Freire's ideals, which included the idea that liberation education must be 'problem posing' in nature, that the learning process should be centred around the posing of real-world, situated problems. As Freire writes:

> Those truly committed to liberation must ... abandon the educational goal of deposit-making and replace it with the posing of the problems of human beings in their relations with the world. "Problem-posing" education, responding to the essence of consciousness – intentionality – rejects communiqués and embodies communication. It epitomizes the special characteristic of consciousness: being conscious of, not only as intent on objects but turned in upon itself in a Jasperian "split" – consciousness as consciousness of consciousness. (Freire 1997b: 60)

This describes the essence of the culture circle – human beings, posing and decodifying situated problems in dialogue with each other. The 'teachable moments' arise from the participants themselves, in response to their own world and their own learning needs, and from this dialogic process arises transformative critical knowledge, including consciousness of consciousness.

Online workshops as culture circle

Online writing workshops come in many different forms in 2012. Some, such as Authonomy (http://www.authonomy.com/) are run by major institutional players. In the case of Authonomy, HarperCollins in the UK has created a sophisticated writers' community in an attempt to monetize their slush pile. In this community, authors submit their work for critique by other authors. The community 'votes' for work, with the promise of the highest-ranking manuscripts being read each month by editors attached to the publisher. HarperCollins gets projects ready-vetted for popularity within genre categories, and authors get the chance to have their work read by industry professionals, in addition to peer-critique. In addition, HarperCollins can sell products and services to their community of aspiring authors. It is a complex ecology of personal and industrial agendas.

In a simpler way, online workshops are now frequently used within an academic context. Prior to 2004, QUT students shared paper copies of their works-in-progress with members of their tutorial groups in one session, and the critiquing took place in a subsequent tutorial. In 2004, I introduced the idea of sharing the stories via QUTs electronic discussion fora attached to individual undergraduate units. Authors would post their works online, other authors would offer textual critique of these works online, and then the critiques and stories would be jointly discussed in-class. Issues arising from the production of the stories could also be discussed online. This blended-learning approach had several benefits: critiquing could be done asynchronously, the 'I agree' factor in verbal critiques was diminished, text critiqued textually mitigated personal characteristics such as extroversion or shyness, and so on, while retaining the time-efficiency and more fluid dialogic dynamic of face-to-face interaction when the critiques were later discussed in class. The approach proved successful enough that it is now common across our undergraduate units. Institutional agendas exist here too, notably around participation and quality requirements for assessment purposes.

Other online groups, such as the IWW (http://www.internetwritingworkshop.org/), critters (http://critters.org/) et.al., are run by their own communities, with informal or nonexistent connections to other industry entities, and with agendas developed by the community for itself over time.

These types of communities, and those that exist in between, typically exhibit three shared characteristics. Firstly, they create environments where works in progress can be shared and critiqued, with the aim of improving the pieces and improving the authors' skills. Secondly, they create environments incorporating expectations of participation (typically, there are formal expectations around critique-to-submission ratios, and/or informal expectations around reciprocity of effort). Thirdly, they create environments where 'shop talk' arising from the writing process can be discussed – for example, technical discussions around point-of-view, or discussions of the writing and publishing industry more broadly.

Three noteworthy points can be understood from these shared characteristics.

Firstly, it can be noted that these communities hold an axiomatic belief in the utility of 'discussion', 'sharing,' and 'support' among peers. Enabling such activities is central to their raison d'etre.

Secondly, it can be noted that this discussion/sharing/support is viewed as a fundamentally communal process, and not one in which support is given from one person *to* another, but rather by one person *with* another. Note that the use of inclusive and collective language such as 'us' within many of these communities' self-descriptions (especially those not allied with other institutions) helps position the authors of the vision-statement as participants in the community.

Thirdly, it can be noted that in these communities, creative activity raises generative problems and questions that are then discussed by the community with a view to informing the creative activity, leading to new questions. In a Freirian sense, these communities are intrinsically 'problem-posing' and exhibit emergent curricula.

These workshops exhibit the behaviours of several broader types of organisational or communal entities. They satisfy, for example, Aurel's definition of an Online Learning Community (OLC), as 'a group of people who share the same interest to collaborate using the web … characterised by knowledge exchange in the community rather than distribution of information' (Aurell 2002: 2). It also meets Lave and Wenger's (1990) seminal definition of a community of practice.

Online communities can be organised in any number of ways and an examination of the hegemonies and hierarchies inside such organisational entities generally falls outside their definitions. Online writing workshops, however, often exemplify a particular type of collaborative culture – a Freirian one. From a pedagogic perspective, these workshops have organically grown to reflect the dialogic ideals of a culture circle as postulated by Paulo Freire. Their designs and technological platform reflect this, being constructed with a primary purpose of enabling critical dialogue among equals in a horizontal dialogic relationship with each other.

Generally, this design engenders a round-table discussion wherein all members have access to all group discussion (moderation and administrative teams and their associated communication channels being one exception), and have an equal, democratic ability to participate. This regulative ideal is what Habermas

calls an 'ideal speech situation' and is defined by Smith (2001) as 'a situation that where each has an effective equality of chances to take part in dialogue; where dialogue is unconstrained and not distorted.'

Although such workshops typically have administrators or moderators, these are often drawn from the pool of workshop participants and their function is primarily janitorial. They manage subscriptions and technical issues, and ensure that discussion is kept relevant to the individual lists. They do not monitor or approve posts, stepping in only to enforce communal standards of behaviour. In the online workshops attached to my units at QUT, for example, I am careful to frame and maintain the fora as 'student spaces' where I will only participate if administrative action is required. I do not myself critique in these spaces, out of a sense that my voice will be disproportionally privileged. I eschew, in other words, the 'educational goal of deposit-making' (1997b: 60) that Freire was so opposed to. In Authonomy, similarly, HarperCollins editors do not give direct feedback into the online space, but rather work privately with those authors chosen by the community for closer scrutiny. In the IWW, Critters, and similar fora, administrators typically participate as readers OR administrators, and mark via subject tags or other devices (within Reddit, for example, moderators can choose to have a coloured M display next to their name or not, depending on the role they are playing), not conflating administrative and editorial roles. Although perceived 'experts' do exist in these spaces (the student whose critiques are particularly insightful, the Authonomy participant who gains a reputation for talent-spotting) access to this (often implicit) status is open to all participants, and typically based on the quality of their contributions to the space, rather than external hierarchies.

Participation in such workshops is, as such, both communal and dialogical. They provide spaces for writers to interact with their peers via discussion about specific works-in-progress and general writing topics with emergent curricula free from external hegemonies.

Freire and codification / decodification

Freire described the learning that took place within the cultural circle as dialectic, a process of codification and decodification. Within a culture circle, the learners use codification to engage in dialogue about the reasons for their existential situation. Decodification of these codified 'teachable moments' then unpacked a context and theory for their situated problems, resulting in a transformational critical knowledge. Freire's goal in establishing this model was, as he stated it:

> We wanted to offer the people the means by which they could supersede their magic or naïve perception of reality by one that was predominantly critical, so that they could assume positions appropriate to the dynamic climate of the transition (Freire 1976: 44).

He asked himself:

> But how could this be done?
> The answer seemed to lie:
> a) in an active, *dialogical*, critical and criticism-stimulating *method*;
> b) in changing the *program content* of education;
> c) in the use of *techniques* like thematic "breakdown" and "codification".

> Our method, then, was to be based on dialogue, which is a horizontal relationship between persons (Freire 1976: 45).

Codification can be thought of as a representation of the participant's situation within the world. Freire used drawings and generative words/phonemes to codify the existential situations faced by the illiterate workers he was dealing with. Codifications work as:

> an abstraction which permits dialogue leading to an analysis of the concrete reality represented. Codifications mediate between reality and its theoretical context, as well as between educators and learners who together seek to unveil the meanings of their existence. (Stevens 2011)

Decodification involved a splitting of these codifications into their fundamental elements, a process of analysis and debate. During this process, the participants began to perceive relationships between codes and other codes, and between codes and the world. Thus, decodification was a process of revealing previously unperceived meanings of the encoded situation and thereby the world.

This process of codification and dialogic decodification is the principle concern of the Freirian culture circle, and I would argue that it is a principle concern of a typical online writing workshop also.

Naturally, in an online context, and with affluent (as demonstrated by their access to technology) members of the first world rather than illiterate Brazilian poor, the process of codification does not take place via drawings and generative words. Rather, codification takes place in two principle ways: firstly through the works of fiction themselves, and secondly through generative questions about the work or the process of creating it.

Fiction is, of course, itself codification. As theorists such as Propp and Levi-Strauss have argued, fiction can be viewed as an endeavour of creating models or representations of the world in order to understand and inhabit it.

Just as Freire's diagrams of situations faced by the rural poor were complex semiotic arrangements, so works of fiction are imagined representations of real world realities. As David Malouf writes in the preface to his novel *Johnno*:

> The cities we know from books, the London of Dickens, Balzac's Paris, that are so real to our senses that we believe we could find our way in them, street by street, are cities of the imagination. They never existed anywhere but in the mind – first of the writer, then, because he put them there, in the mind of his readers. (Malouf 1998: 4)

This is present even in the most figurative work. In Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, as far detached in situation from the 'real' as a novel can be, all the fantastic cities described by Marco Polo are, we learn, representations of the one essential place of origin: the world and the self. They are imagined places, but they are imagining the real.

In a more pragmatic way, the works of fiction are themselves situated problems within the participants' world. The participants of an online writing workshop are working on these fictions as a real-world activity, seeking to improve them, to learn the writers' art. As such they are intrinsically problem-posing and generative. They represent a reality shaped by often unconscious strategies that the writer has used.

The questions an author has about their work, posted in textual format, may also be considered codifications. These are textual representations of issues the author feels they require input on, yet the question that is asked is often not the question that requires answering. A novice writer asking about whether they need to include two plot turning points or three in their novel might be asked by other members if they need turning points at all. They will thereby be asked to challenge the assumptions that form an implicit part of their question. This question is a codification of the problem of structure, the problem of how to tell an engaging story, not necessarily the problem that has been represented. These extra-textual elements, these assumptions and implicit theoretical positions, will often become the object of dialogue in a typical online writing workshop rather than the codification (the text of the question) itself.

Within an online writing workshop, decodification of these codifications takes place via dialogue. All have an opportunity to add, to debate, to discuss and analyse. In some ways, the digital environment is more inclusive of this than a physical one. People can participate in their own time. Because participation is asynchronous, participants have the opportunity to reflect on their views and statements before positing them.

As questions are answered, discussed and analysed, and as works of fiction are critiqued, previously unperceived aspects of the writer's situation are revealed [1]. This is transformational education in the strictest Freirian sense.

Conclusion

This paper is expeditionary rather than cartographic. It attempts to overlay some of Freire's core ideas about culture circles against the contemporary phenomenon of online writing workshops. It is, however libellous in its omissions.

A full understanding of the synergies between Freire's ideas and the dynamics of online writing workshops must incorporate an unpacking of Freire's notion of dialogue, especially his ideas of the 'true' (transformational) word. 'Dialogue' as Freire sees it is much more than simply talking around situated topics. Rather, dialogue (as opposed to discussion or conversation) must contain *truth* or *authenticity* and thereby engage with and transform the real world.

Before he posits his ideas about dialogue in his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire first positions them by reflecting on the nature of the *true* or *authentic* word. The true word, as Freire sees it, is a word capable of affecting change, of transforming the world. A true word arises from a dialectical tension between reflection and action. 'There is no true word that is not at the same time a praxis' (Freire 1997b: 68).

An untrue or an inauthentic word is one stripped of this power to affect. The reflective without the active is idle chatter, an 'alienated and alienating "blah"' (Freire 1997b: 68), a word that cannot be used to denounce the world for it is disengaged, incapable of affecting change, weightless. On the other extreme, action for action's sake, a word without reflection, is equally inauthentic.

There are synergies between these ideas about dialogue, and in particular the relationship between Freirian true words and the forms of critique given within online writers' workshops that bear further unpacking to fully illuminate the relevance of Freire's pedagogic philosophy to the issue at hand.

Similarly, it must not be forgotten that Freire's pedagogy was heavily influenced by Marxist ideology (Blackburn 2000: 4). Freire saw the journey towards critical consciousness as a journey towards liberation from oppression. Decoupling Freire's methodology or ideas about dialogue from their essential political purpose (as I have done in this paper) is to decontextualise and impoverish them.

It can rightly be asked how techniques and philosophies designed to educate the marginalised poor in developing countries can apply to a writers' group of wealthy, educated westerners. Similar questions have not gone unnoticed by commentators on Freire. As Richard Shaull writes:

> At first sight, Paulo Freire's method of teaching illiterates in Latin America seems to belong to a different world from that in which we find ourselves in this country. Certainly, it would be absurd to claim that it should be copied here. But there are certain parallels in the two situations that should not be overlooked. Our advanced technological society is rapidly making objects of most of us and subtly programming us into conformity to the logic of its system. To the degree that this happens, we are also becoming submerged in a new "culture of silence". (Shaull 1997: 15)

Freire himself realised that his pedagogy could not be culturally appropriated in its entirety within the developed world. He wrote, 'I have to be reinvented and re-created according to the demands – pedagogical and political – of the specific situation' (Freire 1997b: 309). In fact, Freire frequently emphasised the need to rediscover and encounter his pedagogy in light of the different contexts in which it might be utilised. He emphasised that 'one must read the world in which words exist' (Freire 1997a: 211), meaning that it was important to consider the unique political and pedagogical 'world' of a learning situation in order to contextualise and implement his ideas.

Having said that, to make Freire apolitical, to simply remove the axiomatic import of social engagement, liberation, activism and conscientisation from Freire's pedagogy is to eviscerate it. As Donaldo Macedo argues:

> Freire's model of dialogics must be rooted within social praxis, reflection and political action working together to break down oppression and the structures and mechanisms of oppression. When the model is imported as a method, without the connection to social praxis, dialogue becomes a form of group therapy. (Macedo, in Freire 1997a: 4)

A further discussion, therefore of how writers might be viewed as oppressed by their educational and industrial context, and the ways in which an online writers' workshop might be viewed as liberating and emancipating is also called for.

These two omissions will provide, I hope, opportunities for further discussion on the relevance of Freire's ideas to the online writing workshop.

When Paulo Freire envisaged his ideal educational space, it was one where:

> …arguments based on "authority" are no longer valid; in order to function authority must be on the side of freedom, not against it. Here, no one teaches another, nor is anyone self-taught. People teach each other, mediated by the world, by the

> cognizable objects which in banking education are "owned" by the teacher. (Freire 1997b: 61)

As an academic, I am a stakeholder in that intrinsically oppressive system of 'banking' education that so concerned Freire (and before him, Dewey and Rousseau et. al). I run lectures to large groups of writing students where the opportunities for dialogue are limited, and where students are treated – in practice, if not in intent – as empty accounts to fill with the expert knowledge I possess. I run tutorials to smaller groups where I set the agenda and curriculum, where an economic exchange has taken place, where I am formally assessing the students on their performance, and where my voice is disproportionately privileged.

At the same time, I am a writer who feels my craft is best served by experimentation, subversion and unorthodoxy. The institutional and economic realities of my teaching context favours the active dissemination / passive consumption model of knowledge exchange all too easily, and yet I viscerally feel that this situation is too tame, too controlled for artistic learning in its fullest. Joe Orton felt that a stageplay should be a Molotov cocktail thrown through the proscenium arch. Sometimes, in the classroom, I worry that I have become that arch.

As such, student-owned learning spaces are something I am careful to include and encourage in the units I teach. Online writing workshops are one of these spaces. Understanding Freire has, for me, gone some way toward understanding the visceral pull I have felt towards these spaces since I first swapped stories with a group of faceless, depersonalised, internet-entities almost twenty years ago and found myself and my art richer for the experience.

Notes

1. It is important to note that not all contributions (questions or submissions) receive an equal number of responses. The level of response is influenced (it seems to me) by a large range of factors, from the quality of the work, the relevance and novelty of the question, the contributor's perceived activity/standing in the community, the amount of closer friendships they have formed, and so on. It is beyond the scope of this paper to attempt to quantify, or even identify, these numerous, often disparate, factors and their impacts. Suffice to say, not all contributions are given equal attention. return to text

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