



Work in Progress

In our high-aspiration world, the focus is frequently on end points: the start of a great new project, filled with anticipation and confidence; the end of the project, when it is revealed as a great performance. We (falsely) believe creativity is private, the product of the muse or an angel, perhaps spiked by a visit from Federico García Lorca's *duende*—a black soul tingling the centers of the work.⁸ With this in mind we welcome news of the start of a new work of creation: a new pattern language, a new system or framework, a new book on methodology, a new novel under way. We drift into anticipation. When the work appears, there's great fanfare again. As members of the audience—for we have no other choice—we admire or we don't. Maybe we will judge the work and recommend it, or give it a bad review and warn against it.

As an author there could be nothing worse than this way of life: You are faced with a long slog alone followed by a verdict, and it's hard in such a situation to separate the judgment of the work from a judgment about you. The author contributes to this in two ways through one action: by claiming the work exclusively during its creation, you merge it with yourself—you are its sole progenitor, and all its successes are yours as are its failures. And by claiming the work exclusively during its creation, you push away the world, create a boundary, make an inside and an outside, placing all who might judge the work on the outside, placing you alone in the center.

This is the natural way of our times: Art is taken to be self-expression, and without the unique and clearly identifiable self at the center of the web of making, how could there be self-expression? Science and technology hold the possibility of fortune and fame—the possibility of owning the idea is intriguing to our selfish needs, and their selfishness is no criticism. The tradition of scientific publication mandates a clear creator, and originality is the benchmark of worth. Both these argue for the lonely way of making in private and unveiling in public.

The act of unveiling a work separates the work from the author, from any human presence behind the scenes; the reader is invited to judge based solely on the selfish needs of that reader. If the work is found lacking—for whatever incidental or crucial reason—the reader has no reason whatever to convey either the nature of the problems or their degrees. What can be taken away by the author is a mere vote recorded, and a purely anonymous one at that. And if the work is found useful or wonderful, little or nothing is recorded about that either—it is an anonymous transaction among mere donors rather than a human interaction in which learning could take place.

Making something is sweaty, hard work filled with false starts and foolishness, sometimes sentimentality, personal demons, and doubts, and even spelling mistakes. The writer sits at the desk and stares at the page, at the screen, and nothing happens, and when it does, what bubbles up is sometimes just what is most full of floatable gas. Think of software development: What might end up being a fine system in the end was built with poor planning, the code looks funny, there were hundreds or thousands or tens of thousands of bugs, the system acted goofy many times, its developers ate pizza while gazing at the screen and drooled Coke on the keyboard, some fell asleep fixing bad indentation, and in general, it was a mess.

Of course, few would want to pull the curtain aside to reveal this sort of reality, and the nature of the work while in the midst of such clamor is likely to reflect that clamor. In the software development world, corporate closed doors shield the development process from the outside lest the grime and bacteria of the real process be too graphically revealed.

But what would happen if the curtain were to be pulled aside in midstream? What would happen if instead of a grand performance on opening night, the work in progress were opened up by a humble author for the aid and assistance of colleagues both close and distant? What if the work presented were not the final work ready for judgment but a work in progress in need of help presented by a needy author? What if the audience were invited to be co-owners, coauthors?

There is still an inside and outside, but those invited by the author to help now sit on the inside, they can become coconspirators, coauthors of a sort—criticism someone makes on the inside can be as easily taken as a criticism of that critic as of the author, in a spiritual or moral sense. When the author invites you to help, you join the author at the center of the web of making, because the author has given you a gift or several: You have received the gift of the work itself, which is a work with a purpose and the worth of its doing, and you have received the gift of honor as a sort of coauthor even if you will never be listed on the cover. You have been honored by trust and an appreciation of your skills and talent, and of your trustworthiness, because the journey from the beginning of a project to its end is a personal one, it is just as messy as described earlier, and only the closest can be easily called into that scene.

Now you and the author are both in the same little boat cast away from the safety of finished things, and the way out is through the work itself. It belongs to each equally for that brief time, and as both of you focus on it sitting there in front of you, the *other* as critic—the judging stranger—is only in the periphery, comments about the piece are about the piece and not about either of you.

This is the magic of the gift.



The idea of the work in progress fuels the best aspect of the writers' workshop: A writers' workshop is a circle of authors who have decided to give the gift of their works in progress to the group in order to create a gift-based exchange aimed at improving the pieces in question.

The alternative is the grand performance, where the only two reactions are approval and rejection. A writers' workshop aims to be a writing family in the small, egoless—pursuing the life of the work, focused on the work and not on the individual, though sympathetic to the labor needed to complete the work. A good writers' workshop is where the author feels that any risks taken in the work will be seen and appreciated for what they are and not seen as evidence of personal flaws or weaknesses.

The creative writers' workshop can be one of the most intimate situations one could encounter outside the bedroom. A poet friend who has run writers' workshops for years tells this story of one of her students: "One of my students once told me that the reason she continues coming to my workshop year after year was that it was the one place where she was able to relate to others as her true/real

self on a very deep level, that close attention to her writing improved both her writing and her life.”

Even the technical writers’ workshop can be more intimate than many technical people and scientists can handle. The quirks of writing style, hidden prejudices, private agendas, faulty reasoning based on hidden assumptions—all of these can come out, revealing the person beneath the writing. Pride exists everywhere, and the writers’ workshop can uncover it.



I have participated in hundreds of writers’ workshops, in the creative writing, software, and business arenas. When the writers’ workshop fails—as it sometimes does—the results can be explosive.

For creative writers, the work can be personal, and for some the risk of the workshop’s not forming a gift-giving circle can be too high. Such writers may find the experience devastating, and others will avoid the workshop altogether or quickly leave it. I’ve been in poetry writers’ workshops where individuals have fled in tears, left the particular workshop, abandoned all workshops, and have quit writing. In the creative writing community, apparently fewer people than in the technical and scientific writing community recognize that the writers’ workshop is a gift-based community. Some in the creative writing community still hold on to remnants of the performance attitude and the idea that by cutting down another’s work, one’s reputation is enhanced—as if the one who can rip another writer the hardest is somehow the most artistic.

In the software world, I have observed individuals become embarrassed, turning beet red on hearing certain comments, but this is rare. The difference between the two communities is that the creative writing community is older, more personally invested in the work, and, in general, more jaded to the workshop. The software community is younger, more professionally invested in work, and more enamored of the workshop and how it seems to work through magic.



The adoption of work in progress as an attitude has three consequences: It provides the gift that starts the community, it determines the culture of the community, and it provides a safety net for the individual contributor.

When writers individually decide to give the gift of their partially formed works to the others, each hopes for several things: to receive affirmation of the worth of the work and of the self behind the work (acceptance and approval); to receive ideas on how to complete and perfect the work; and to be exposed to the ideas and interactions of the group.

The writers' workshop is formed by the creation of a "work-in-progress" community with a shared purpose and shared culture. The shared purpose is to repair and celebrate the work, and the shared culture provides rituals and rules of behavior that work to keep the spirit of gift-giving healthy within the community.

The individual in the writers' workshop survives the experience by taking a stance separated from the work itself. By viewing his or her own piece as a work in progress, the author can form around the piece a moat that shields the self from the sting of criticism. After all, the work is not completed and therefore does not represent the self's best work.

Just as each work in the writers' workshop is a work in progress, the workshop itself is a work in progress. The group forms and might last only as long as it takes to review all the pieces, or it may go for many years and many reviews of single pieces and several pieces by each contributor. In either case, the workshop is a community and it evolves each minute, with each interaction, at each stage of review, with each new piece. The workshop accumulates stories and shared experiences, and the richness of the experiences includes the works themselves, just as books read in common form a ground field between two people.



Making things requires the discipline of having made lots of them. Not only must a person master certain craft techniques, but he or she must have the confidence that what is important will be attended to and what's incidental can be ignored to some extent. When we look at what separates amateur from professional photographers, we see some superficial things: Professionals might have more cameras or more expensive cameras, they might have more sophisticated darkroom materials, and they might even have business cards announcing themselves as photographers. But the biggest difference is how much film they have shot and how much film they shoot for each subject.

A professional photographer has shot many thousands of rolls of film, and probably has thought carefully about why the results of each picture were as they

were. Looking at the education of artists, a common thread is that they have thought about what they are doing while and after doing it.

And there is lots of doing. The reason to make a lot of whatever one makes is to become used to the degree to which it can pour out rather than being forced out. This way we come to see where conscious thought and design are required rather than subconscious craft and technique. When I decide almost unconsciously now how to indent code, it is the result of having observed good indentation, done a lot of indentation while thinking about it, and done a lot without thinking too much about it.

A professional photographer will shoot many, many shots of the same subject, bracketing exposure, trying different exposure durations, moving the camera around, trying different angles, different lighting, different filters, different props if that makes sense. The results will be in a distribution—a few not so good, most pretty good, and maybe a few that are really great. Now all the photographer has to do is select the best ones and work with them a bit in the darkroom or on the computer.

The number of photographs taken to get some good shots can be staggering. For one piece in *National Geographic Magazine* using twenty-two photographs, the photographer took about forty thousand photographs—this is over a thousand rolls of film to select just twenty-two photos. This might seem like a typographic error or a fluke. Here is an excerpt from a story about another photographer, Joel Sartore:

The standards are incredibly high. For a photo story on Nebraska that ran in the November 1998 Geographic, Sartore had eight weeks total to shoot, which he broke up into several one and two-week intervals over two years of time. Of the 31,320 photos he shot for the Nebraska story, only 16 ran in the magazine.

Between 60 percent and 75 percent of a photographer's time doing a shooting project like this is spent researching the subjects, planning how and when to take the pictures, getting in position, and other things peripheral to what we think of as the actual photographing.⁹ Once the film is shot, the best photographs are selected and then the photographer works in the darkroom or with Adobe Photoshop to perfect them. We all believe the perfection part of the story, but we don't believe as deeply or appreciate the selection part.

Another example is filmmaking. The movie *Apocalypse Now* runs under 2½ hours. To get those 2½ hours, the filmmakers shot 250 hours of film. That means



that for every hour of film on screen in the final version, over 100 hours of film were shot.¹⁰ Once the film is shot and selected, the work of perfection goes on in the darkroom, perhaps on a computer workstation, and then in the editing room.

Great art is a process of making lots of things, knowing how to select the good ones, and knowing how to perfect them—making stuff, choosing critically, making some mistakes, being able to recognize them, and then being able to correct them.¹¹ Making art is not magic, and it can be done by ordinary folks.¹² But we also need to learn how to look critically at what we produce and to dissociate it from ourselves so that criticizing the work is not criticizing its maker. The writers' workshop is one of the best ways of doing that.

By cracking open the process and inviting people to participate in the work in progress, we can learn how to attend to the partially made work, how to select the good parts, and how to perfect them. We learn the critical skills to judge our own work by watching others apply their critical skills to our work and to others'—and by practicing it ourselves on work we are not personally invested in. That is, the work-in-progress method is one of the best ways to learn critical skills at all stages of risky making.¹³

What is a writers' workshop? It is a gift-based community whose gifts are works in progress and suggestions by a group of newly formed coauthors. It provides acceptance (yes, you can make such things) and approval (yes, what you make is good and we like it).

Like parents and close relatives, the workshop watches in appreciation while the new author tries to stand and walk, and almost any good effort toward this end will be rewarded. The workshop is where the results of taking a risk are rewarded, if in no other way than by providing enough of an affirmation that the maker is encouraged to go on and make more things, to try new things, to take more risks, to reflect on what works and what doesn't, to select what is best, and to perfect it.

For experienced writers, the rewards are the gift and community and the deepening of what already has begun to be learned—because there is no such thing as having mastered writing, one can continue to improve and understand the craft. And if not that, the craft can be changed and reinvented.