

ESL Students' Reflective 'Burning Experiences' at a Writing Workshop

Adcharawan Buripakdi

English program
School of Liberal Arts
Walailak University
Nakornsrihammarat
Thailand

Abstract

Writing workshops can become a site of igniting a genuine passion for writing. This paper explores how writing workshops can be used to empower and liberate students. It describes the experiences of graduate students in writing workshops in which students learned to empower and liberate themselves as creative writers while writing a personal book. Grounded in a narrative research approach, this study is a description of ESL students' reflective 'Burning Experiences' at a writing workshop held in a graduate class in the United States. Based on personal interviews and ethnographic observations, a Thai student narrated her experiences and those of her thirteen classmates from seven countries toward the creative writing project in the workshop. Findings reveal that sharing stories that students were "burning to write" allowed them to get rid of the 'I can't write syndrome'. These students also felt empowered, were freed of constraints, and found their own voices. Most importantly, the writing workshop was a site where students used writing not simply as a tool but also as forum to express their real identity. Finally, the compelling experiences in this writing class included the negotiation of writers' roles, the discovery, exploration and identity negotiation and construction. This study provides teachers an alternative way of teaching ESL composition.

Introduction

A product of a 90s class in Thailand, I learned English through a product-oriented approach. In this respect, writing workshops, peer responses, and theories of the writing process were all new concepts to me when I took a masters course in the United States. On a snowy day during the spring semester, I attended a "teaching writing" graduate class with high

expectations. I had heard positive things concerning the reputation of the professor who taught this class since first entering the program. The first class began with a general outline and specific requirements of the course. Unlike other courses, the professor came with a one and a half page course syllabus written in a casual format, detailing a schedule of "workshop, workshop, and workshop".

A composition classroom was warmer not because of the heater but because of the professor's energizing lecture. The room seemed to burn with his energy and his students' curiosity. I sensed that not only I, but all of the students were moved by his lecture. At that moment, I felt that the classroom was gradually transformed to a performing arts studio. It was the scene of writing I had been looking for; the scene where we could act freely; the space where we could "paint" in writing in colors of our choice. We had been encouraged to write the story we were burning to tell the world. At the end of the class, I talked to a classmate, "I have no idea what to write." My statement ran counter to one maxim that had been presented in the writing workshop, namely that, "all writers have stories to tell". On the way home, I wondered what my first workshop would be like.

Burning to Tell the World

In the second week, I went to the first writing workshop in my life with hope, joy and curiosity; it was a thrilling journey. Gabriel (2002) had prepared me to be open and to examine the role of writing workshops from multiple perspectives. He states:

The writers' workshop is bundled paradoxes: the private act of writing mixed with group criticism, the gift economy of shared works mixed with mercenary workshop moderators, and the generosity of supportive comments in a forum that seems better suited for cutting people down (p. xv).

Gabriel further argues that while some students may expect a glorious affirmation of their own talent and skill as writer from their first writing workshop, others may experience emptiness at the end of the workshop. For some, there are tears, fears, doubts and shame. Some writers go on; some quit. What struck me most was Gabriel's notion that, "the writers' workshop is a dance, and without knowing the steps, a participant might trip, even fall ... the feet that are most badly hurt will not be those of the experienced, but those of a new writer, a young

person" (p. xvi). The writing workshop proved to be even more fascinating than I had first imagined it.

We students were to craft a ten-page book of creative writing unified by the theme "burning to tell the world". The aim of this creative writing project was to provide an opportunity for us to create something permanent. Students made photocopies of the drafts of their work and distributed them to the class one week in advance. There were two drafts submitted each week. Then, the class sat in a circle to have a share-meeting (Calkins & Harwayne, 1987) and carry out the public act of writing (Graves, 1983a). From time to time the professor kept calling for the students who would be sitting out of the circle to get closer to him. While sitting in this circle of learning I felt the power of love and care. Then each student made one comment about what he/she liked or recommended the draft for revision. One comment did not seem enough for students; some added "two and a half"; some made "one and a half" comments; some were told to stop when they seemed to take others' time. It was a joyous experience of sharing responses.

The workshop brought together a variety of people with varying skills and knowledge. It was a great opportunity to meet, learn, and share stories with twelve PhD and two MA students in the workshop during that semester. The workshop opened up the "burning experiences" of writers from various walks of lives. It was also a once-in-a-lifetime lesson involving diverse readers from seven countries: Saudi Arabia, Jordan, South Korea, Guam, Taiwan, Thailand and the US. As Calkins has observed, "Writing invites us to put ourselves on the line, to bring ourselves into classrooms, into teaching-learning transaction. And that has made a world of difference" (Calkins & Harwayne, 1987, p. 21). In this workshop, we read, wrote and gave feedback in a harmonious atmosphere. There was no "whiteness"; what we shared was the "color of love" through writing. Most importantly, the workshop allowed me to write with others — an experience I had not gone through before in my home country.

Teacher's Roles in the Writing Workshop

In *Writing: Teachers and Children at Work*, Graves (1983b) emphasizes the role of the teacher as a facilitator in the writing process. He notes that in any classroom the feelings generated comes mostly from the tone of the teaching that takes place there. The tone of writing workshop teaching, then, begins with teachers seeing their students as writers. The tone of any interaction begins with how those involved feel about each other, how they identify with each other. Teachers who

genuinely like their students will have a different tone to their teaching than teachers who think their students are "little troublemakers" (Ray & Laminack, 2001, p. 42). In this workshop, the tone of the professor's teaching and that of the workshop really facilitated learning.

Calkins & Harwane (1987) contend that it is important to remember that teaching impacts not only by what we say but also by how we say it. More importantly, Grave (1983b) points out "the tone for writing is set by what the teacher does, not by what the teacher says" (p. 12). I was certainly very gratified to be a part of the conversations in this workshop, which was neither a forum to show off nor a site of a dominant discourse. In effect, students were free to write on their own. Consequently, they experienced the kind of freedom that leads to creative writing. Experts in the field of teaching writing agree that, in order to be effective, teachers must write with their students, modeling, demonstrating, and sharing in the writing process (Graves, 1994; Calkins, 1994). In this workshop, even though the professor did not write with us, his comments, delivered from a point of view of an experienced teacher, editor, and writer were very meaningful and helpful for us. He showed us how to write, enjoy and create meaning through writing in general and writing "what you burn to tell the world" in particular. I learned that the more we responded to others' drafts, the more we felt confident in our own writing abilities, because we trusted the teacher. As Calkins (1994) stressed, teachers do not necessarily need to perceive themselves as writers or write on a daily basis in order to teach writing effectively. More important was the need for teachers to experience the power of writing at least once in their life and draw on that experience in order to teach. Indeed, Grave (1983b) identifies the best writing teachers as those who ask big questions and deal with them honestly, as those who make big decisions about their own literacy and expect students to do the same. At this point, I was gratified to come into contact with the heart of writing and experience the art of good teaching. This workshop, to put it simply, had worked wonders for me.

Students' Reflections on the "Burning Experiences"

Using multiple lenses and drawing of different multicultural identities, students articulated various aspects of their experiences in the creative writing workshop. Brooke (1991) declares, "Writing only becomes meaningful in social interaction, in discussion, thinking, and collaboration with others we respect." For example, Angela, who never had any previous experience of a writing workshop, reflected upon her experience very interestingly thus:

I learned the value of positive feedback. That is when criticizing others' writings; be nice, find something good to say; writing is personal; it is comprised of peoples' souls. Then ask questions instead of telling them what you think it should be like; in other words don't be arrogant.

The workshop encouraged students to focus on subjective understanding, and lived experiences. In the process it helped shape a writing pedagogy that prioritizes the lives of students, considering them central to the act of writing. For example, Nicky wrote a poem by experimenting with "key words" from the workshop's conversations. She revealed her feelings about the experience saying:

I really enjoyed writing my book ... I wanted to do creative writing-poetry — because I wanted to write with more emotion, more honestly than when I write academic papers. I feel like a part of me is removed from my academic writing in order for it to fit in somewhere (I don't know where). I don't feel that way when I write poetry.

Like Nicky, Mathew enjoyed his experiments in the workshop, "It has been great to be able to experiment in a graduate class." In addition, the workshop opened doors to inexperienced writers such as Wanda, Wong, Angela, Diana and as well as myself. Wanda, writing about the love story that she had composed, said:

I never write something like this. I learn a lot from this workshop. I'm sometimes nervous. I think we should start from small group first. Without experience in writing workshop, there is lot of anxiety when we have to listen to the readers in a big group like this.

A writing workshop can bring to students' writing a texture that is "concrete, filled with specific content and accented as individual utterance" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 272). In the workshop the teacher not only accommodated but also actively promoted the creative potential inherent in self-expression and subjective experience. In this way, the writing workshop became a site where students used writing not simply as a tool but also a way of expressing the self they already had. Simply put, the writing workshop can become a means by which writers find that they have a self to express (Harris, 1987, p. 161). Diana for example, noticed, "I realized I didn't constrain myself when I wrote this book. It's not academic papers, so, I just wrote it for me." Like Diana, I felt free from academic constraints when writing my book. I discovered then what writing really meant. Writing about my childhood was an incredibly rewarding experience; learning how audiences "see" my writing was even greater. Elbow and Berlanoff's notion (1989) helped me understand the art of writing. That is, if writers want to get

readers to experience something, writers must experience it first. In this workshop, reader responses taught me how to write to make readers "see" my writing rather than "tell" them what I had in the writing. In other words, I wrote with bodies and a somatic mind (Fleckenstein, 1999).

Murray (1991) believes that students have unlimited freedom to think and to act. Creative writing and personal writing genres in this workshop provided a widely open space for self-expression. Besides, since students were granted freedom to choose any topic to write about in this workshop, we were able to experience the elasticity of the frames within which we wrote and to transform them, albeit in small ways. In this regard, the writing workshop pedagogy was flexible and democratic enough to embrace the expression of diverse students. The varied topics that came from the writing of different students made for a richer and, livelier learning arena (Lensmire & Satanovsky, 1998). For example, Wong, an international student, talked about his work thus; "Since the professor doesn't limit us to a certain genre, so I just write anything I want." Mihas, writing about the aftermath of 9/11, acknowledged, "This is the first time I am asked to write personal writing in this program. I have more freedom to write in a new free way." Philip added, "It was nice to write something different from the traditional academic essay".

While most of the students enjoyed writing in their preferred genre, there was one student who did not feel at home with the genre allowed in this workshop (Bawarshi, 2003). Relating a personal writing genre with power relationships, Carmella said:

Knowledge is power. When you take information or "knowledge" related to your personal life and you put it in writing, you are making parts of yourself accessible to others. Your words do have the power to move and influence others, but also you are giving your words a power over you by creating a permanent record that contains a piece of you.

The writing workshop is a site that leads us to different kinds of genres, a site where students can construct their identities through genres they choose on their own. In this context, a genre, according to Bazerman (1997) is "a tool for framing challenges that bring students into new domains that are yet for them unexplored, but not so different from what they know" (p. 24). While a genre may kill, restrict, reduce and mutilate for someone like Carmella, for me and other students in this workshop, a genre seemed not to "kill but it gives birth, it midwives, it makes possible" (Brook & Jacobs, p. 215).The paradox of genres

reminded me of Gabriel's notion of a paradox of writing workshop, which is the conceptualization of literacy as power (Gabriel, 2002). Carmella's case clearly showed that in writing workshops, the paradox of genre is experienced individually, within the choices students make, and within the wider identity negotiations that match individuals' stages in college and life. In writing workshops genre becomes a fruitful site for identity negotiation. This is the genre's strength and its possibility.

For me time flew during the act of writing. The workshop was quite student-centered; participants were active, involved, and had a sense of belonging. I was excited while working on my drafts. I spent one week on my book, planning, setting a theme, projecting scenes and sequencing many stories in my mind. Ultimately, I decided to write with the genre I loved and found that I felt most comfortable with autobiography. I took another two weeks to finish the first draft. It was an act of writing I would never forget; I enjoyed recalling the scenes of my life, selecting, and negotiating what I wanted to present as "me". While writing, I was curious about the feedback received from readers, especially, the professor. From the comments I received, I gained freedom to write and felt like I was allowed to be myself having experienced the spirit of reader response in real practice.

To me, the secret of writing my book was courage. Unlike Camella and Kiko, I was not afraid and did not feel resistant/or hesitant to open up my "burning experience". Besides sharing my personal slice of life with others, I found writing from memories to be a healing process that offered me temporary escape from reality. Adopting a different point of view, Kiko wrote her response in my book;

I love your writing. You use very descriptive language — beautiful language. This kind of language is sometimes very hard for me to do because it is so personal. Such writing makes us dig deep into ourselves. I am scared of what I will find; and sometimes I simply get tired of searching. But your search is written down beautifully here, and you should keep writing.

Some students looked at the creative workshop as a site for liberating writing and enhancing identity construction. Different students expressed different viewpoints. For instance Rachael said: "A writing workshop allows student to discover and formulate his/her values, attitudes, and beliefs. Writing helps a person identify who she/ he is." Diana agreed with Rachael, "A writing workshop is definitely a site for constructing identity and I think it has potential for

liberating writing." Regarding free writing, Paula observed that it happens on, "Only if the student is given the leeway to choose his/her own topic. If strict guidelines are imposed there is nothing liberating about it." From a different viewpoint, Lauren responded, "Indeed, writing is liberated because the primary feedback doesn't come from the instructor, who theoretically has the authority. This provides feedback from a number of sources." In this regard, Philip observed:

A writing workshop, for me, is more than liberating and helpful in the construction of identity. Writing workshop offers students a chance to collaborate on, share, and create ideas that inform and transform their writing and thereby the ways in which students communicate and construct their identity through language, which can be a liberating experience.

Some students relate their workshop's experience with voice. According to Lensmire (1998), the goal of a writing workshop is the expression of the soul. The goal of voice is a part of the workshop's attempt to humanize writing pedagogy through the acceptance and encouragement of students' assertions of 'I am' in the classroom. Rachael commented on the subject thus, "Writing workshop allows students to discover their own voice, which cannot be taught by direct teaching". Developing a voice can only happen through writing". Diana too related the genre of her choice to voice, "I can write with my voice freely. My book is something that I have definitely taken ownership of."

I learned most in this workshop from listening and contributing to discussions about other students' project particularly those that were unlike my own. When the workshop examined the difficulties in a particular piece, I could sometimes quite clearly see those difficulties in my own work. Wong shared his feeling about this issue in this manner "I learn by seeing what other students write and benefit from the constructive comments they made on my book." Angela declares, "How good it feels when people say that they like my writing; then, I should treat other writers the same way." Nicky reflected on her experience differently from others:

The biggest thing I learned was to reconsider comments on my work. I really got to see how different people in the class reacted differently to the same piece of writing. For example, one person would say, "I love this line the way it is, the imagery is great!" but then the next person would say, "You know, that line was confusing, maybe you should cut

it." It really helped me as a writer to not try to "please" my reader, or all of my readers.

Angela, Paula and other students reported gaining invaluable advice and feedback. Gabriel (2002) writes, "What we cannot make alone, we can make together. This is the promise of the writing workshop" (p. 168). Gabriel states that the author gives the gift of work-in-progress to a group of writers, each just as afraid as the other, and that the group will own the work for a while and give back the gift of suggestions. As Angela observes, "I learned the value of their feedback, especially when it is clear that the intended meaning is different from what the readers interpreted." Paula notes, "I learned how to be slightly more constructive in my criticism. I like the "HWICYMI (How would it change your meaning if) technique." On occasions, I experienced the workshop as a place where I learned to trust myself, believe in my ability and grow beyond the workshop. In this regard, Kiko and Angela echoed my feeling. Kiko shared her feeling at the end of the workshop: "This class makes me trust my ideas. I never felt as comfortable as this before. Since we also have international students in this class, it makes me understand what it means to be Native Americans." Angela articulated her experience in this manner:

I thought it was a wonderful experience. I really did have a story that I was "burning to write." I have a bunch of others too. After having had this experience, I have decided that I would like to join a group of writers who write creatively so that I can work on all of other stories that "I'm burning to tell." I imagine that they exist on campus.

Rachael left the workshop with the feelings that she, "was able to write about topics" that she had had in "mind for quite a while".

In sum, writing about the "burning experiences" book gave me and other students high self-esteem and helped us get rid of "'I can't write' writing syndrome" and the feeling that we do not know what to write, that we have nothing to write, that we do not have the ability to do it, and that we are not good enough to write. Kiko's reflection is a good example of the way the workshop impacted on all of us: She wrote: "most of all, I appreciated what I learned about writing from this class: to say what I mean, and mean what I say."

Conclusion

Because of this workshop, I now see writing instruction as being about role negotiation, and identity negotiation (Brooke, 1991). The "burning experiences" in the writing workshop, as Brooke says, is not learning a set of strategies for text production or a set of conventions for genres or academic or business prose — the burning experience in writing class is the negotiation of writers' roles, of discovery, exploration, identity negotiation and construction.

The workshop came to an end on a sunny day in spring. Looking back, I recall the laughter, smiles, questions, lessons, and friendship. This workshop was over; the workshop I would conduct, however, had already begun growing in my mind. Looking forward, I dreamt of hosting my own writing workshop, where my students could experience "writing life" as I had in this workshop. Like Atwell (1991), I hope that my own writing workshop will be a place where students behave like writers, performing the act of writing, and finding the time, choices, and access to others' responses, just like real writers, just as I had myself received a wonderful writing opportunity from this workshop. I hope my students will be apprentice themselves to an adult practitioner of the craft of writing. I wish someday in the very near future I will get the opportunity to use writing workshops to change students' perspectives to be a better writer and a more complete human being.

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