

# Defense of the Defensive Writer: A Therapeutic and Relational Approach to Workshop

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Emerging from a thesis seeking to characterize the undergraduate creative writing workshop experience, this article identifies the reasons for defensive behaviors in workshop through the use of Relational-Cultural Theory, a therapeutic model that posits how we grow through our relationships with one another. An analysis of eight in-depth interviews alongside my own experience are used to examine how and why individuals in creative writing workshops reject feedback, even when they want to grow as writers.

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Peer feedback is a pedagogical tool used throughout writing studies in a variety of different capacities. Not only is one-on-one peer feedback a tool utilized in composition classes as a model for many undergraduate tutoring centers, peer feedback as a whole is the basis for creative writing pedagogy. According to two surveys of creative writing professors, one by Carl Vandermuelen in 2011 and one by Diane Donnelly in 2012, the structure of creative writing courses often relies on or includes some form of workshop. While the peer-feedback model can be incredibly beneficial, it may not always lead to positive growth, particularly in lower level workshops. One of the largest impacts on student growth is defensive behavior, most commonly seen in one's resistance to feedback through either deflection or confrontation. Some have argued that these issues may be structural issues within the workshop (Kearns) and others that undergraduates may not yet be mature enough for workshop. However, by approaching workshop through student experience, individuals can examine how issues in workshop may not purely be structural, but relational as well.

Defensive behaviors, such as denying others' feedback, interrupting workshop, or invalidating feedback, negatively impact workshop in a variety of ways. The defensive writer harms their own growth in denying and resisting feedback, as well as the trust and relationships they have with their fellow students. This in turn makes it harder for the critique the defensive writer gives to be taken seriously and for the defensive writer to receive quality critique, as students place less effort into critiques when they feel the other person will not listen. This article, serving as a defense for defensive writers, seeks not only to explain student perceptions of defensiveness, but also why students may behave defensively. Additionally, analyzing this behavior in a relational context offers possible insights into why current methods of confronting defensiveness in the workshop are not inherently effective.

## Methods

This piece comprises one element of a larger work, an auto-ethnography on the under-

graduate creative writing experience in workshops, and primarily identifies the issue of defensiveness within my own workshop experience. The experiences of undergraduate students at Goucher College, including myself, are integrated throughout, and analyzed relationally. I use Relational-Cultural Theory to study how disconnections that form from defensive behavior occur and impact workshop.

### ***Goucher College's Workshop***

The workshop model requires that each student submits their own work and critically reads each other student's work (Bishop and Starkey). The "workshop" of a student's work refers to the in-class discussion of a student's work, and can look much like the example above. Two to six students may have their work critiqued in a workshop during a single class period, depending on the form of creative writing and professor. Required critique varies from in-class participation to simple annotations on each story to full-page letters synthesizing the main points of critique. Each workshop differs depending on the professor's style, but many professors subscribe loosely to the format of the Iowa Writer's Workshop, which is credited as being the oldest and potentially most successful creative writing workshop (Bell; Bishop and Starkey; Bizzaro).

It is important to note that this paper focuses on student experiences at Goucher College. As Frank Conroy, former head of the Iowa Writer Workshop, explains, "Certainly, writer's workshops around the country reflect wildly different assumptions about what the work should be, what the goals are, and how progress should be measured. . . . So it follows that in talking about a writer's workshop it must be made clear just

whose workshop is under discussion" (80). Goucher College itself is much less defined and traditional than a lot of workshops across the country. Professors generally require some sort of feedback to be given, not just through discussion, but also through annotations or letters. Two of the professors require revisions to document individual growth through the workshop. Earlier forms of workshop tend to include more reading, potentially writing prompts, and less formal workshop (two to three workshops per student). Higher levels of workshop prioritize the workshop discussion, and while reading may be present or required occasionally, the workshop takes precedent.

### ***Participants***

Seven out of my eight interviews are referenced in this piece. The students named here have chosen or been given aliases for confidentiality purposes, and all identifying information has been removed to the best of my ability, as is standard for interview based studies that go through IRB approval. At the time of interviewing, all of these students had taken three workshops or more. David and DS were graduating seniors during the time of their interviews, Rose, Logan, and Poe were first semester juniors, and Scarlet was a second semester sophomore. Xavier was a junior at the time of interview, but had taken time off during his degree. My experiences shared in this paper happened my freshman year, but the analysis and research of them took place over the course of my Junior and Senior years, through research for a methods course that developed into my senior thesis.

### ***Procedure***

While my experiences were placed together

primarily through journal reflection, the experiences of my participants were compiled through a loose interview structure in the Fall of 2017 and throughout the 2018–2019 school year. Each interview began with the same question: “Would you begin by describing the first, or most salient, workshop experience you’ve had?”

Most participants would describe the first workshop they had, and the conversation would move forward naturally from there. Prior to the interview, all participants signed a consent form, and were told that while I could not guarantee anonymity, given the small size of Goucher, I could secure confidentiality and would ask for permission regarding particularly identifying details (e.g. a story including opening a mason jar). Interviews lasted anywhere from 30 minutes to an hour and a half, and took place in a location of the participant’s choosing.

My goal with these interviews was to replicate the kinds of conversations that occur outside of the creative writing classroom between classmates. Course reflections and even professors researching these topics may look for comments and critique on classes and professor performance, but unfortunately do not have access to the conversations students already have about these topics due to timing issues and/or power imbalances. As an undergraduate student myself, I was able to document these conversations because of the casual nature of the interviews, the flexibility in time and location, and the lack of a power imbalance, as I was a peer rather than an administrator or professor.

### **Relational-Cultural Theory**

Many scholars approach the workshop through the lens of community, or at the very least through the lens of collaboration,

and find this to be key to their success (Johnston; Bizarro; Mayers). Students can learn from one another in these spaces, as well as receive perspectives they ordinarily would not have acknowledged, and even (in the best scenarios) build connections to other writers that continue outside the classroom. Because of this consideration of workshops as community spaces, potentially in ways that other classrooms are not, it is perhaps natural to examine the workshop through this relational context. Doing so can help to identify some of the issues that professors and students encounter within the workshop. A relational focus can define many of the seemingly random reasons a class may not ‘vibe’ or have positive engage with each other. After all, the openness of students to accepting one another, as well as their perceptions of how another student treats them and others, impacts their understanding of that student and their work. Students develop their own communities even within the workshop courses themselves, particularly when they are fairly large, and base many decisions about revision and submission of future works on whether they feel they will be understood. This is a relational dynamic based in trust as well as a potential pedagogical area of exploration.

Because previous scholars named workshops as communities, I applied a theory that looks at how individuals within communities form connections to each other. *Relational-cultural theory* is a feminist and social-justice oriented theory that recognizes our relationships with one another, and the power structures within them, as guiding our individual growth (Jordan, “Relational Cultural Therapy”). This theory, originated by psychoanalyst Jean Baker Miller and first

established in *Towards a New Psychology of Women* in 1976, contrasted earlier psychological scholarship/research by (1) identifying women's tendency towards empathy as a strength and (2) critiquing the western concept of "the separate self" and the concept of solitary development over time (Jordan and Hartling). The core of RCT essentially boils down to this: we grow because we relate to, are related to, and develop relationships with others. *Growth fostering relationships*, in particular, encourage the mutual growth of both/all individuals involved (Jordan, *Relational Cultural Therapy*).

If we see relationships as informing student growth, then the creative writing workshop, and indeed all peer-feedback based pedagogy, works because students build even the most seemingly minor growth-fostering relationships with one another. These relationships most importantly include *mutual empathy*, or a willingness for all individuals in a relationship to empathize with one another. Additionally, there are *five good things* that result from a growth-fostering relationship: *energy, clarity of oneself and the relationship, a sense of self-worth, a capacity to be creative and productive, and a desire for connection* (Miller and Stiver). These patterns of behavior, or patterns of connection, also help to build growth-fostering relationships, as demonstrating them and fostering them in a relationship can help strengthen the relationship and allow for individuals involved to grow. The five good things also have exact opposites that result in disconnections, which impact both the relationships individuals are in and student growth (Jordan, *Relational Cultural Therapy*; Miller and Stiver). These opposites are patterns of disconnection.

### ***RCT and the Defensive Writer***

Defensive writers, as will be detailed in

later sections, are prone to utilizing patterns of disconnection. This means that they may show defensive behavior by not engaging or interacting with classmates (lack of energy), refusing to participate in class activities and not providing written feedback to others (capacity to be creative and productive), or actively invalidating others' critique of their work (desire for connection). This indicates that defensive behavior may not be limited to verbal exchanges, though those are the most apparent. A fellow classmate of mine once watched YouTube with the captions on during a workshop of her short story. In watching this video during class, she is showing each of those patterns of disconnection. She is not putting forth the energy to actively listen, she is denying herself the ability to develop her work creatively by not listening, and actively denying the productivity of the workshop as she is not engaging. She is also inadvertently showing those around her that she does not care to honor the time others may have spent reading and critiquing her work, and therefore denying a relationship with them. The other patterns of disconnection, a lack of clarity of oneself and their relationships and low self-esteem, are factors that may impact the creative writing workshop, but they more often inform behavior that can be categorized under a lack of energy, capacity to be creativity and productivity, or desire for connection.

While a defensive writer's patterns of disconnection (lack of energy, clarity of oneself and others, self worth, productivity, and desire for connection) are certainly recognized as behaviors that inhibit growth, they are also often recognized within RCT as normal in relationships. As Jordan explains, patterns of disconnection "occur when one person

misunderstands, invalidates, excludes, humiliates, or injures the other person in some way” (*Relational Cultural Therapy*, 25). These patterns are not inherently uncommon in any type of relationship, so their presence in the cases of workshops (most commonly through misunderstandings and invalidations) is not altogether surprising.

### **Why Defend Defensive Writers?**

My interest in defensive writers stems from having been one myself. In my first creative writing class, my second semester of my freshman year, I experienced my first workshop. I had 7 years’ experience writing and zero experience being critiqued by a group larger than four—my class had at least 16 people, not including the TA or the professor. This is a generally overwhelming experience regardless of external circumstances. It does not account for the fact that I had submitted a short story about grief, which was unintentionally deeply connected to a traumatic experience that had happened at the beginning of the semester and alluded to my growing awareness of what my anxiety looked like.

The main critiques I received for the piece regarded an overuse of repetition and a lack of external conflict. These critiques, while holding validity to various degrees, hit me much harder in the moment, as I felt no one appeared to be asking “why” I had made these choices. Much of the critique amounted to feelings rather than actual analysis of craft. For my larger thesis, I wrote a narrative covering the entire experience, but below is a segment wherein I describe my specific defensive reaction to the critique I received:

When it came time to share my intentions in that class, a lot of things went through my head; after all, having

people talk at you about your story for 20 or so minutes about a variety of different topics can leave one discomfuted. I remember that I was more calm at first, that I asked who had picked up my reference to Romeo and Juliet, and a small “ohhh” echoed from the class. I remember being frustrated, being stuck on repetition, opening my mouth to say, “I was trying to—” and my voice squeaking and my eyes starting to water, and I remember being mad at myself as I said, “I was just trying to represent anxiety, and, just, that’s what I was using the repetition for, cause that’s how it is for me, and just—” and while the next words out of my mouth were “how do I do that?” I think the rising of my voice attempting to counteract the shakiness within it left the second part inaudible. A few people started to say that they hadn’t meant, but I interrupted again saying, “I just want to know how to show it.” And the professor called for a break.

If we discuss this relationally, my defensive behaviors, namely attempting to establish the repetition as real (“that’s how it is for me”) and the emotional reaction, were due primarily to my feeling that my classmates were expressing lack of desire for connection through a dismissal of my intention. This was certainly not their intent; indeed, many of them likely gave the presenting of their feedback barely a second thought, and my want for my intention to be honored was not feasible in this form of workshop. My reaction was also influenced by a lack of clarity of my relationship to the class, as I anticipated deeper feedback that

didn't come, and by a lack of clarity of myself, which was due not to an inability to understand my work, but to my inability to understand the recent life experiences and new realities I was experiencing that informed my work.

My interest in this research comes from my attempts to understand how and why I reacted the way I did. I should note that I did not intend to be dismissive of others' feedback, just as I did not intend to cry, frustrated, at the end of the workshop when it was time for me to share my intentions and ask questions of the critics. In that moment, I was a writer who wanted to get better, but felt that no one was bothering to think through my work.

While I recognize not every defensive writer is the same, I now hope to clarify that while defensiveness may inherently be seen as ignorant, selfish, stubborn, or cocky, it may also be insecure, scared, confused, and unsure. It has taken me three years and a thesis to not only understand how and why I acted the way I did, but also to forgive myself for having acted in such a way.

### ***Trauma and the Workshop***

It has been generally acknowledged through a multitude of work that trauma often connects to writing (Kuhl; Leahy; Vandermuelen; Wiseman). Various pieces have examined the ways in which professors and social workers can utilize writing to process traumatic events, and how sometimes the way into writing can be through trauma (Wiseman). What people write, depending on genre (nonfiction, poetry, or fiction), can either directly respond to trauma or only slightly allude to it. Whatever form it is in, trauma can be a powerful and consistent source for what students write about. David,

for instance, expressed in his interview: "I think that I've been generally trying to write one specific thing for the whole time and like every stage has been an attempt to write about one specific trauma for like four years." I very much understand this as well, and earlier in this same interview, on the topic of kindness/empathy and intention in feedback, David and I had this exchange where I referenced a large trauma that occurred right before my first college workshop:

ME: There's three thousand layers of story on top of the dramatic ... the traumatic thing, and I've become more aware of myself doing that now. But when I was writing in that workshop, um, something really bad had just happened to my roommate and she left. And so I basically was unintentionally writing about the grieving process there, which then made it harder to get workshopped because I unaware of it. And obviously the class was unaware of it and certain things that were being critiqued [representation of anxiety through repetition; internal focus] — I wasn't able to do that emotional separation just yet. And it was good to have that kind of workshop because it forced me to learn not to defend my writing right on the offset, but it was also really rough first going through it. And like, if I didn't love writing so much, it probably would have discouraged me from continuing.

DAVID: I relate to that and I understand that. Um, usually, usually I just sort of ... allow it. Like when I write about something that's incredibly personal, but people can't tell exactly or

maybe yeah, just aren't treating it like that. Um, then, uh, I'm just like, you're right. Like, you know, ah . . . I dunno, I just, you know, I can take it personally and just believe them. Like there's something wrong with me.

For me, my defensiveness during that first workshop came from a lack of understanding myself and why I was drawn to the topics I wrote about. During my first workshop, I had undergone a trauma that took me two years of therapy, support, and an auto-ethnography to even identify as such. My trauma shaped not only the piece of writing I submitted, but how I interacted with the feedback I received on that submission.

David, who also writes close to his own trauma, identifies an almost opposite reaction to feedback that, while less external, may be just as harmful. David identifies feedback as being critical of himself and his work, and rather than becoming frustrated or defensive, he takes it in and it then affects his own view and understanding of himself. I include this to highlight something key about trauma and defensiveness: just as there are defensive students whose works are not connected to their trauma, there are non-defensive students who internalize feedback of their trauma-related works.

While trauma is not the focus of this paper, I find that both my case and David's are important to mention. Should I only name mine, an assumption might be made that I am insinuating that anyone who has experienced trauma in class will exhibit defensive behavior. Additionally, in naming both experiences, it brings to light that trauma can be present in students' writing regardless of intent, and that it may play a factor in how students respond to or

internalize feedback. For some students, this is the sensitive nature of the work that they bring in—even that which may not seem to be sensitive material. It's not a matter of these students not bringing in emotionally sensitive work; they may not know their own sensitivity, as I did not, or may simply want the work to be revised by the class and feel prepared ahead of time. Unlike in a workshop group that is designed to encounter trauma and examine it within a context where it is understood to be inherent, the undergraduate workshop specifically separates student experience and intention from their work, and may allow harsher or cruder feedback as a result.

### **The Case Against Defensive Writers**

The defensive writer was by far one of the most present topics in my interviews, and often is one of the key aspects of a workshop most discussed among creative writing undergraduate students outside of the classroom. While the latter is not included within this paper, it is important to note that people feel incredibly disconnected from individuals that appear to be refusing or dismissing feedback time and time again. Rose, referencing her 400-level, explains how sometimes defensive behavior, even "I meant to . . ." may disrupt a classroom, particularly during moments when writers are, after silence of the author, given space to ask questions and share intent:

[Professor A would to the writer] be like, "alright, do you have any thoughts or things?" And everyone's just like, "oh thanks. And, this is what I wanted to do." But I feel like the environment can be a little, not hostile, but people are defensive of their stories. Like they're like, "well this is what I

was trying to do...” And it’s like, okay, we just were giving you feedback.

Here, defensive behavior as described by Rose is not necessarily aggressive or hostile towards the classroom environment, but can appear as dismissive of others’ feedback and serve as a pattern of disconnection. Specifically, this apparent denial of others’ feedback shows a lack of desire for connection. This reaction to defensive behaviors in class is not all that uncommon. In a case where a student was perceived as seeing himself “above” class feedback, DS shared her frustration:

He blamed a lot of the negative critiques on like the class ... And it’s like, again, you’re not hearing the critiques, you’re not conceptualizing that maybe there is something wrong with this first draft of a piece. And it just gets really frustrating to the point where I’m like, why are you in a workshop? Why are you like, why am I giving you feedback? Why are you sitting here for feedback if you aren’t going to take it?

DS here highlights an additional pattern of disconnection, as her classmate’s refusal to take feedback seriously leads to her feeling a loss of productivity from the workshop. Scarlet also experienced this in a previous class where defensive behavior was incredibly common. Because of this, she’s slowly become more frustrated about the denial of feedback:

I am the kind of writer where I really, really appreciate blunt feedback and I don’t want to say ... I find it hard to respect other writers who can’t handle it because I totally understand not being able to handle criticism, but

like ... no one wants to be criticized; if you can’t accept someone else’s honest feedback, then why are you writing?

As shown above, even when writers do not intend to be dismissive or defensive, perceptions of defensiveness and assumptions of others’ intentions may lead other students to judge and disconnect from the workshopped writer. Scarlet names a loss of respect for individuals who show resistance to feedback. DS as well names a lack of trust in her classmate to actually take her critique seriously. Later in the interview, she elaborated:

A friend was talking about somebody’s piece, that [the writer] had gotten all this feedback, and then sent out this mass email that was like, “I will not be taking this feedback.” If I got that, I’d be like, cool, I’m not reading your stories anymore, or I’m not giving you critiques anymore because what is the point of me wasting that energy? So that’s another thing because I think that might also have been something with [classmate]: is he going to change anything? Is he going to listen to me? I feel like no.

Both seen in her reaction to her friend’s story, and in her connection of it to her classmate, DS deliberately highlights the distrust and disconnect that defensive behavior creates. The defensive writer in her friend’s story is not only showing that she is rejecting critique, she is also rejecting her classmates and depriving any critiques they may have sent of value; thus, they lose the ability to be productive. For DS, people who behave this way do not deserve the energy she is putting into their critiques. If

someone refuses to take any critique seriously or critically, why should she engage?

Much of my frustration in my first creative writing course came from a feeling that even in later workshops, I was receiving poor feedback. It was not until after that workshop that I began to think that the quality of my feedback, while potentially low due to the low level course I was in, was also potentially low because I had already shown an unwillingness to listen. During that first workshop, I had wanted specific feedback that didn't just say *what* people saw, but *how* I could make it appear the way I'd intended. Regardless of my intent, the way I attempted to express this need signaled to others that I was dismissing their feedback and was hurt by it, despite the fact that the feedback was not inherently harsh. In being defensive, I placed my classmates on the defensive, also shown above in the repetition of the sentiment across Rose, Scarlet, and DS's interviews: "why are you here?"

### **The Case For Defensive Writers**

The vulnerability that a workshop requires, and that writers are asked to step into when they enter a workshop, is not inherently easy. Bishop and Starkey note that the process of being given critique on work by many people at once may be difficult, and inherently sets up a power imbalance between the writer and the rest of the class, particularly if, as is often the case with silence of the author, "the potentially dialogic nature of the workshop is muted" (199). At Goucher College, the class sizes for creative writing can range from around 13 students to upwards of 20. Receiving feedback from such a large group can be overwhelming, to the point where experienced students establish tasks for themselves

to do during workshop that allow them to focus on their critique, such as doodling, annotating their work as critique is given, or, in some rare cases, knitting. One participant, Logan, noted that she sits on her hands to keep herself focused. I personally take intensive notes so that I can't think too hard about the critique I'm receiving in the moment. While some are prepared from the beginning to step into workshop with little to no practice, such as Poe and Rose, it can be a daunting endeavor to receive feedback from a multitude of people. That is not even taking into consideration the potential for students to bring works of emotional significance into the workshop, which may increase the risk of disconnection, as both a lack of clarity for oneself and others as well as lower self-worth may be present. The root issue, however, may be tied to the role of intention in the undergraduate workshop.

### ***Clarity, Self-Worth, and Intention***

Up to this point, I have primarily discussed two of the five patterns of connection (the capacity to be creative and productive, and the desire for connection) in relation to defensive writers, because the patterns are more visible and most clearly impact other writers within workshop. However, the other patterns, specifically clarity of oneself and the relationship and sense of self-worth, inform the behaviors defensive writers may exhibit, particularly for defensive writers who are seeking growth. For instance, interruptions when silence of the author is present or explanations of "I was trying to..." may feel acceptable to a student who feels their intention isn't being heard or is attempting to steer conversation towards issues they want to hear more about. Because many workshops don't allow for

the writer to state their intention prior to class discussion, even writers who are not defensive may become frustrated during their workshops, and potentially ignored. As Xavier explains:

I'd very much like it if either at the start of the workshop if the author could have a moment to introduce the piece ... Something to allow the author to set the starting point of the piece rather than having to basically sit back and let people go on tangents. Because sometimes, sometimes, it'll uncover like something really useful. But sometimes it leads to workshops where you sit down and your piece gets workshopped for like half an hour, and it's a half an hour of no one answering any of your questions or getting to anything you want to focus on.

Xavier expresses here a desire for the writer to have a say in what is discussed during workshop. However, due to the design of the workshop, there is a lack of clarity for the writer and their classmates about what aspects of a story should be discussed. As Xavier here explains, ignoring intention creates a gamble in whether or not a student writer's concerns are addressed, in addition to a lack of clarity for classmates as to what material is most important to discuss. It certainly happens that there are successful workshops that do not include intention, but, when intention is ignored, writers may become increasingly frustrated or confused over areas of critique that add to the problems they see in their writing rather than minimizing them. This frustration built out of a lack of clarity and miscommunication may lead naturally to disconnects that appear to be or become

defensive behavior.

A lack of clarity of oneself or a distorted sense of self-worth may also impact how a student interacts with the critique they receive. The idea of distorted sense of self-worth and lack of self-awareness playing a factor in response to feedback does seem to resonate with student assumptions about defensive writers; however, most view "distorted" to mean "inflated." Many students' perceptions of defensive writers being stubborn, self-important, pretentious, or "above feedback" may come from this very assumption. If another student appears to feel overly confident in their workshop piece and unaware that "maybe there is something wrong with this first draft of a piece", as expressed by DS, their disregard for feedback seems more to be a case of them denying other's "incorrect" perspectives instead of following workshop etiquette and taking the critique given into consideration as you continue writing.

While these assumptions are prevalent within creative writing classrooms, defensive writers may, rather than having inflated egos, have low self-worth or low opinions of their own writing, and may not be good at judging their relationship to their writing or what the strengths and weaknesses of their writing actually are. In many ways, a workshop setting may be an ideal way to combat this, as students are then exposed to other, potentially more reality-based, perspectives of their writing. However, even if a defensive writer is seeking growth, they may be unable to push past issues of insecurity due to the central relational paradox.

### ***The Central Relational Paradox***

The central relational paradox occurs when an individual who already feels

isolated wants connection, but is unable to enter into the vulnerability that connection may require, for fear that it will isolate them further (Jordan, *Relational Cultural Theory*; Miller and Stiver). Upon hearing critique that ignores their intentions or contradicts their perspective, a student might utilize behaviors of disconnection “to avoid perceived or real risks of hurt, rejection, and other forms of relational disconnection, social exclusion, and marginalization” (Comstock et al. 282). It should be noted that the central relational paradox is a phenomenon that occurs for most people, as with patterns of disconnection. Any individual who is subject to shame or feelings of self-imposed isolation and unworthiness—for instance, a child who is afraid of being called on in class and therefore does not make eye contact with the teacher—may experience the central relational paradox (Comstock et al.).

What makes the central relational paradox a paradox is that the only way to break it is to seek connection. Those who feel feedback has put them on the defensive, or that feedback is not taking into consideration their intention or perspective, won't seek further connection with other students, or will actively dismiss these connections (further feedback) because those students “don't get them.” When the central relational paradox is applied to students, those that are confronted with feedback which appears to contrast or infringe upon their reality or the “reality” of their work may disconnect from the rest of the class to keep themselves safe. In this sense, the central relational paradox is not simply a reaction to hearing or experiencing uncomfortable situations—it is a survival mechanism. For students who already have a distorted sense

of self or lack self-awareness, something such as a multitude of people misinterpreting what to them is a key piece of their work can lead them to encounter the central relational paradox.

In my case, my initial frustrations with the feedback I received, and even the frustration I held onto months after, came from an inability for me to see others' perspectives of my work because they denied my perspective and understanding of myself. This was not intentional on their part, but upon the declaration that my use of repetition “was uncomfortable” and should be “taken out,” I felt that not only was a key piece of the narrative I wrote being ignored, but I was being told that my experience of anxiety at the time was not realistic. Obviously, no one had said the latter directly, but because I was so closely connected to that element of the story, the critiques of my story conflated with a critique of my self. Because I denied the validity of their critiques of that piece for the months following, I exhibited patterns of disconnection throughout, which led to poorer critique of my work later in the course and served to further solidify my feeling that no one was trying to understand my intent. It was not until a class a year later that I began to exhibit the patterns of connection that allowed me to develop more fully as a writer. Once I allowed myself to listen to other perspectives and actively sought to understand why they might approach my pieces in those ways, I began to actively grow as a writer.

### **Current Solutions**

Given the prevalence and impact of defensiveness in workshops, professors use a variety of methods to limit it as much as possible, some of which are structural solutions that have been in creative writing

circles since its beginnings in academia. Silence of the author is the oldest and most common structural tool utilized in workshops to keep defensive writers from intruding and interrupting their own workshop (Kearns; Conroy; Vanderslice; Mayers). There is a great deal of discussion on whether or not it achieves this purpose, but regardless, some students feel that this is the key, perhaps only, reason to have silence of the author as an enforced policy in workshop.

Scarlet, who had two of her three workshop experiences in a classroom without enforced silence of the author, shared, “I also really liked the idea that like the author can respond to things—I hate silence of the author. As long as the author isn’t getting defensive, which happened in our class so many times; it’s not the place in a workshop for you to be like, ‘well this is what I meant to do.’” While Scarlet supports author responses to feedback, she dislikes when people use that as a reason to deflect feedback that contradicts their view of their story. Later in the interview, Scarlet clarified that it is often beneficial to understand what a writer was attempting to do, so as to best guide feedback and potential suggestions, but it is difficult to do this when a writer utilizes intention as a means of ignoring others’ perspectives of their work. This is echoed by DS, who reiterated that silence of the author is

helpful for when there are people who just cannot refrain from speaking. It’s helpful to have them be silent during their pieces because I’ve noticed in classes where that hasn’t been a thing ... it would turn into a conversation where the writer would just be like, “oh, well I meant this.” “Oh I meant this.” And they were too busy

defending themselves to sit back and process the comments. So I think I like it when the author is silent and then at the end that conversation can happen.

While neither of these students were opposed to workshops lacking silence of the author, and indeed both recognized the merit of workshops that do and do not use it, they both felt that it was necessary in the case of defensive writers as a way to ease them into listening.

Silence of the author may limit tension between defensive writers and their classmates or condition students to be silent during their workshops; however, this does not inherently mean that defensive writers (1) do not exist in those spaces and (2) do not still exhibit defensive behaviors or feel defensive over their work. There is the case of the classmate I mentioned earlier, who watched YouTube during a workshop of her piece. In that case, silence of the author gave her an excuse to disengage from the conversation about her writing. She is not the typical case, but still exhibiting a form of defensive behavior that silence of the author does not account for. For those defensive writers who genuinely want to grow, but have difficulty becoming vulnerable, receiving feedback can become easier over time, potentially due to the act of solely *listening* to others’ feedback time and time again. However, silence of the author, if only used for the purpose of silencing defensive behavior, does not truly confront what causes and exacerbates defensive behavior—insecurity, denial of reality, and overall, perception of isolation.

Another tool professors may use to combat defensive behavior is to preface workshop

with a single statement. Discussions surrounding defensiveness within creative writing at Goucher College centered on this: *if you don't like someone's advice or suggestion, you don't have to take it.* While true in nature, this statement does not truly confront the causes of defensive behavior. Furthermore, this advice avoids a key aspect of learning how to give and receive feedback; just because you dislike a suggestion does not mean it has no merit.

This is not to say that this is bad advice; indeed, I agree with the sentiment behind it, and after considering the merits of others' criticisms or having found the group that most closely resembles 'my readers' in a class, I tend to take this advice wholeheartedly. Nevertheless, it should be considered that this statement being the primary focal point of a discussion on how to process feeling defensive is misguided. Not all defensive writers are dismissing critique because they dislike it. In cases of the central relational paradox, defensive writers dismiss critique in order to keep their view of reality—whether that is the state of their work, their life experiences, or their view of their self—intact.

This is also not to say that the answer is to completely eradicate practices like silence of the author or to keep undergraduate writers from workshop for potential lack of maturity. In fact, the workshop process may be beneficial for many students in developing the skills to understand and communicate their own goals for their work, particularly when professors give space for students to discuss how to do so. This was certainly the

case for myself, and, despite the variety of critiques that all of my participants gave of workshops, all of them felt workshop had the potential in many cases to be beneficial. As evidenced here, issues of defensiveness arise more often from isolation (self-created or otherwise) from the class providing feedback. Addressing that isolation, and how it is created, through discussion prior to workshop, and therefore reframing the way students expect to receive and interact with feedback, may be another, more productive path forward in limiting the effects of defensive writing in a workshop style classroom. Additionally, acknowledging and encouraging all students to acknowledge intentions behind written works may allow not only for less defensive behavior, but also for more productive workshops in general.

There may be cases where defensiveness is less a case of denial of experience and isolation, and more a matter of ego, as it is often perceived, and it is unlikely to avoid all defensive behavior simply through the knowledge that it exists. However, recognizing publicly that defensive behavior can be an expression of insecurity or uncertainty may allow for students like myself, who express defensive behaviors unintentionally, to not only be more aware of the feeling, but also feel less ashamed and isolated when we do feel defensiveness, keeping the central relational paradox from occurring. Of course, this can't be concluded simply through an interview study. However, it might be something to study further, as silence of the author isn't necessarily doing this job, at least at the undergraduate level.

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