Selections From the New Book Room

Writers' Workshops and the Work of Making Things: Patterns, Poetry... / Richard P. Gabriel
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Richard P. Gabriel's book on writers' workshops is unusual in a couple of ways. While the workshop method has been used extensively in writing programs in high schools, colleges, and community and adult education settings, there has been very little written about how one actually goes about setting up such workshops. This book definitely fills the gap, explaining both the nuts and bolts of the practice of the writers' workshops, and examining the theory behind them as well. It covers both regular, on-going workshops that meet in homes, schools, or workplaces, and "special" workshops, where writers basically go on retreat for a period of time to focus on writing. The book is also unusual in that the author has experience with both creative writing (specifically poetry) workshops, and workshops that have focused on software patterns writing. While writers' workshops are quite common in creative writing programs, they are perhaps less known in the technical writing community.

Gabriel defines the writers' workshop as "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)." While the emphasis is on positive acceptance and approval, Gabriel also makes it clear that the workshop is meant to be a learning experience where honest feedback on "what works and what doesn't" is given to budding authors in a supportive setting. Concrete examples from Gabriel's own workshops experiences illustrate his suggestions throughout the book.

The book begins with a short overview of the workshop process and a chapter discussing the importance of group work in what is usually seen as an independent, isolated activity. Following these two chapters are the two main sections of the book: The Work of Making Things, which contains three chapters covering the creative process of writing, and Writers' Workshop, which contains thirteen chapters that move the reader through the workshop process, step-by-step. Gabriel's explanations are quite thorough, but sometimes there is so much detail that the reader feels bogged down in the prose. It might have been useful if Gabriel had outlined the general steps of the workshop process, in addition to providing the lengthy narrative.

Two useful appendices follow the main text, one giving examples of "workshopped" pieces of writing from both a poetry workshop and a technical writing workshop. The other appendix is a list of "Guidelines for Feedback" for both writers and readers/listeners in the workshop setting. The book also includes a short list of references which refer the reader to additional sources of useful information on writing and writers' workshops, and one of the most detailed indexes I've seen in a book in a long time.

Writers' Workshops & the Work of Making Things could serve as a useful tool for anyone wishing to introduce the workshop experience into the creative or technical writing classroom. It would also be of interest to those exploring the writing process on their own and wishing to find a way to bring their work into a group setting. — reviewed by Alison Lewis