Best Practices for the Yale Writers' Workshop Experience

Our goal is to support creative innovation and positive collaboration between our students. Respect for all identities and a safe, productive classroom space is an essential part of this equation. At the same time, art is a place to explore difficult questions. We are here to nurture freedom of expression, including the necessity of telling challenging and confrontational stories.

To do this, faculty and students alike can cultivate an environment of mindfulness, one in which all members of the community feel both free and respected, and can navigate with confidence and a sense of security the toughest conversations that will naturally arise when engaged in bold, imaginative, boundary-pushing work.

LISTENING TO OTHERS AND CLASSROOM BEST PRACTICES

When someone is speaking, that is their time to speak. Let that person finish a thought, and refrain from interrupting or speaking over them. Listening is an important skill to cultivate, sometimes as important as voicing an idea or response. Be aware of the balance of commentary in a workshop setting. Lack of verbal contribution can create negative energy. Dominating the conversation may keep others locked in silence. Your personal choices affect the room as a whole. When there is a difference of opinion, focus on the content, not the creator. Consider that fictional characters often do not behave perfectly or speak the way you may believe they should speak. Try to separate out what a character or story might need for narrative purposes from whatever that character or story might personally provoke in you.

When writing a story/characters outside of your own immediate experience, whether of class, race, gender, age, etc. -- and most every storyteller is going to be doing that at some point -- remember that you bear responsibility in the act of representation. Make an effort to be open to the thoughts of others who may have a more immediate and real-life grasp of what you are exploring.

The classroom should be a place where provocative and sometimes extremely personal ideas flourish. As creators we must draw on our real experiences and emotions, even when they feel risky or may prove problematic to others. One of the goals of our community is to ensure an environment where that can happen. We ask students to invest themselves in an atmosphere of trust. Please honor the privacy of peers who choose to share their experiences.

While "characters" within fictional contexts may use racially charged language or labels (or language that deals pejoratively with gender preference, class, age, etc.), in the process of critique, writers and faculty should refrain from using that language and be aware of the impact their words can carry. Epithets attached to a particular identity can carry a major weight when spoken aloud.

It is healthy and necessary to discuss the veracity of a character's actions or words within a fictional context, but it must be done with consideration and respect. It may seem obvious, but students and faculty should not make comments or pass judgment on the gender, sexuality, ethnicity, age, or bodily appearance of any writer, or the characters they may be writing.

If subject matter proves troubling to a writer, that writer can ask to be excused from the classroom for the duration of the discussion of the work in question.

Best practices developed by Columbia University professor Katherine Dieckmann.