

Lessons from EuroPLoP: About Workshop Moderation

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1 Introduction

EuroPLoP 2012 will mark this writer's tenth EuroPLoP. During this time the author has learnt. This paper sets out to capture some of the author's observations and learning about writers workshops, and to record the author's preferred way of workshop moderation.

The author does not claim significant originality in the workshop moderation format; rather, the process described is a fusion of observations about workshops and the author's own learning.

2 Audience

This paper is written for those participating in a pattern conference, e.g. EuroPLoP or PLoP, and in particular those who will moderate writers workshops.

3 The workshop

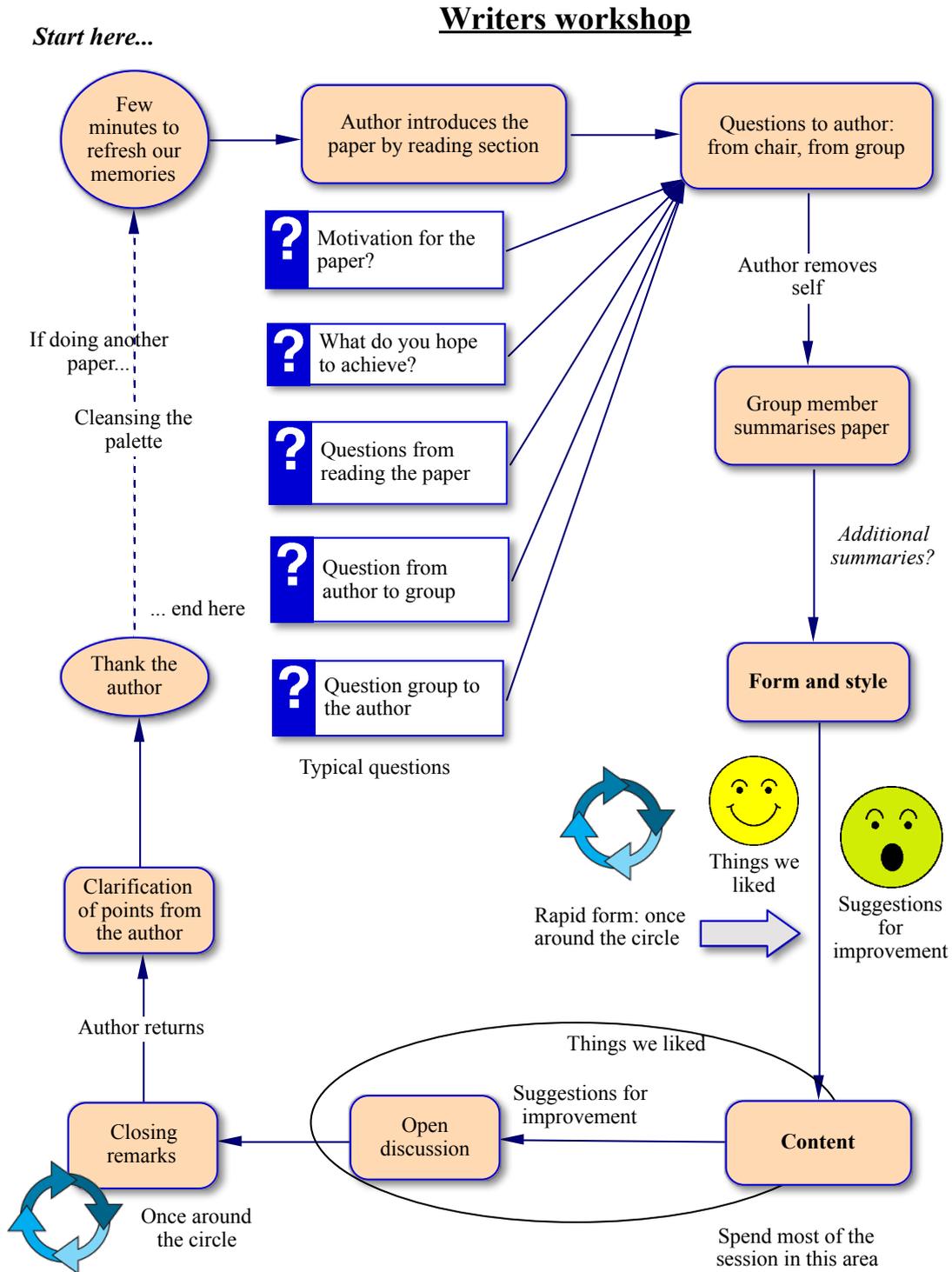
For several years EuroPLoP workshop moderators have been encouraged to experiment with the writers workshop format. The author's observations and experiments lead to the creation of the Figure 1 flow chart - often referred to as a *crib sheet*¹.

This sheet has undergone several modifications over the years and has been used by multiple workshop moderators. The intention of this paper is to a) put the diagram on record and b) to add some descriptive text.

The crib aims to both help workshop moderators steer the workshop and to tweak the traditional workshop style (Schmidt, 2006, Coplien, 2001, Gabriel, 2002)² to one this author feels is more effective. Changes to the style are centred on four forces: The Moderator, Questions about the paper, Time and Loudmouths.

¹ Oxford Dictionary of English defined crib as: *informal, translation of text for use by students, especially in a surreptitious way.*

² Schmidt provides the shortest description of the three; Gabriel's work is a 300 tour de force in workshop format and style.



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Figure 1 - Writers workshop crib sheet

Pacing a traditional workshop to allow enough time for surface level comments to be aired and for deeper issues to be explored is hard, even for experienced moderators. In particular, experienced authors may find too much time in the traditional workshop style is eaten up with compliments -

"what we liked about the paper" - and deeper issues once exposed cannot be adequately addressed in the time remaining.

The format presented aims to flush out as many surface level, uncontentious, comments quickly in order to allow more time for in-depth discussion.

Workshop moderators are free to adopt this crib sheet as is, ignore it completely or make any modifications they deem desirable. Less experienced moderators may well prefer to stay closer to the crib while experienced moderators may feel it unnecessary.

3.1 Moderator role

In each workshop there is a nominated moderator –sometimes referred to as the *moderator* or *workshop leader* (Gabriel, 2002). Whatever the role is called someone takes the lead, at the request of the conference chairs, in ensuring the workshop operates.

While the workshop moderator will normally run the workshop for the first paper it is traditional that other members of the review group will act as moderators for other papers. In small groups each reviewer will have the opportunity to moderate one paper, in larger groups not everyone will have the opportunity. Typically no one person will moderate the discussion of more than one paper.

One of the first acts of the overall moderator therefore is to set out the order in which the papers will be reviewed and decide who will moderate each review session.

The duties of this leader typically cover:

- Agreeing the order the papers will be reviewed in
- Moderating at least one review session
- Soliciting volunteers to moderate the other review sessions
- Guiding first time workshop moderators as needed
- Keeping the workshop within time constraints
- Key holding for the workshop room
- Defend the absent author from over zealous reviewers
- Educate reviewers and authors about the workshop format and possibly about patterns in general if useful

Additionally workshop moderators are asked to participate in the final review of papers in the *on-site shepherding* group (previously *writing group*) which are assigned to the group so they may have a voice in accept the revised paper into the workshop (typically on the last day.)

In recent years some workshop moderators have taken to sending a personal e-mail to participants by way of introduction and to provide a friendly reminder to read papers before the conference.

3.2 Voice of the author

The traditional workshop style limits the voice of the author under review to constrained elements at the beginning and end of the workshop: the author is asked to read a section from the paper as introduction and, only at the end, to ask *questions for clarification*.

In recent years this author has been privy to several discussions in which it has been suggested that authors be allowed a greater voice. Indeed, some have suggested a more active role for the workshop moderator, one closer to a television interviewer asking the author questions about the paper.

Such a style calls for the moderator to take on a more active role and for a more engaged author during review. In so doing the moderator needs to devote preparation time and attention to reading a paper in depth and preparing for the review. Because dedicated preparation is required only those who can, and have, prepared for the paper can take on the role. Consequently the ad hoc assignment of workshop moderators also becomes more problematic.

The format presented in this paper allows the author's voice to be heard more fully and framing questions to be resolved at the start without asking for significant extra work from the moderator.

3.3 Questions about the paper

This workshop format opens in the traditional way with the moderator asking the author to read a section from the paper under review. However, rather than immediately asking the author to become a "fly on the wall" the next step is to allow questions to the author from the gathered reviewers. This time is deliberately limited so it does not dominate the workshop – which is itself time limited.

Allowing questions allows reviewers to clarify their understanding of the nature of the paper, why it was written, who the audience was and similar questions. The answers to these questions frequently changes the comments made in the review.

Where pre-questioning is not provided for workshop participants sometimes spend time reflecting on the nature of the paper, the audience, or some other matter, which adds little by way of useful feedback to the author.

Normally the workshop chair starts this process with a question like:

"What motivated you to write this paper?"

"What did you hope to achieve by writing this paper?"

Or by asking a question they have from their own reading of the paper.

Like the questions illustrated in Figure 1 these are suggestions only. The moderator, and other group members, is free to formulate and ask their own questions.

Next the moderator asks the wider group if they have any immediate questions to the author about the paper.

The intention is not to hear from every reviewer, or to subject the author to integration. Rather the intention of these questions is to understand the context the paper was written in and surface anything the workshop reviewers find confusing about the paper that would prevent them from reviewing the paper.

For example, a paper without an audience statement frequently leaves the reviews wondering about the tone of writing, the level of detail in solutions and even the referencing style used. On occasions the review group can spend half the time debating who the audience was and what is the correct approach. Surfacing this early and hearing from the author directly helps the group situate their comments.

Authors usually appreciate the opportunity to answer direct questions and help direct the reviewers. Reviewers may then be able to point out tension between what the author states verbally and what is written in the paper.

Caution is required to limit the time spent on opening questions. Every minute spent quizzing the author reduces the time for review. While there is no hard or fast limit to the number of questions which can be posed experience shows that five or six is the common maximum. Beyond this, or when the author and a reviewers start an open debate, the moderator should step in and move the workshop on.

Occasionally during the workshop review itself a question, or point of questionable understanding arises. Traditionally the reviewers would debate this among themselves, sometimes at considerable length, while the author remained silent as a “fly on the wall.” On such occasions the moderator may choose to temporarily recall the author, ask the question and receive the answer before having the author again absent themselves.

On these occasions the moderator themselves should ask the question to the author themselves. They should not allow debate and should seek to keep the authors presence short.

3.4 Loudmouths and silent ones

Traditional workshop style relies on reviewers to initiate comments, e.g. one reviewer decides to speak up on a point; they may be interrupted – gushed or ungushed³ – during their comments. At the end their comments someone else will continue with the theme or start another comment.

EuroPLoP regulars know that there are some workshop participants who like to talk, and there are others who remain silent. Neither position is right or wrong. However, powerful speakers can easily drown out quieter less forthright participants.

³ By tradition EuroPLoP and PLoP workshop participants say “gush” when they wish to quickly agree with a comment being made by another reviewer, and, “ungush” when they wish to disagree. Usually “ungush” is used as a marker for a comment which will be made in future.

The following sections outline several techniques that can be used to encourage feedback from silent ones and put loudmouths to the background, at least momentarily. Sometimes it is only a matter of knowing how to politely pause a loudmouth and allow space for a silent one.

3.4.1 Once around the circle

Feedback to the author tends to fall into two categories: straight observations about the paper, whether something to keep or a suggestion for improvement, and discussion between reviewers which should lead to a concrete suggestion for improvement. However, too much of either can prevent the other from being discussed.

Therefore, in this style, the moderator is encouraged to go *once around the circle*: each participant is, in turn, given an opportunity to make their comments while other participants stay silent. Comments in response to these comments are held until the end of the circle – with the exception of “gush” which is permitted.

For example, when moderating this author frequently goes once around the circle for the initial round of “what we liked about the paper comments”. Starting to his left, or right, each participant is given an opportunity to state what they liked about the paper. When they have finished the person next to them takes their turn.

This procedure generates a great deal of feedback for the writer relatively quickly, most of these comments are general uncontentious and only need stating once. Consequently the review can quickly to move onto the more contentious issues and items requiring discussion.

An additional benefit is that every reviewer gets an opportunity to speak and can have their voice heard. When this occurs at the start of a workshop, as with “what we liked” this can be a powerful way of encouraging people to speak. Once a reviewer has spoken they are more likely to speak again.

It is common to also use this format for a final “what we liked about the paper” or “closing remark” comments when closing the review.

3.4.2 “Anyone who hasn’t spoken?”

Another way of soliciting comments from quieter members of the group is to ask:

“Would anyone who hasn’t spoken on this topic like to add anything?”

This simple question tells the *loud mouths* to give space while encouraging *quiet ones* to speak up. The moderator should not expect an immediate response; indeed several seconds of silence may elapse before someone speaks up. The moderator may follow up with a specific invitation,

“Peter, do you have anything to add here?”

Moderators should restrain their use of directed questions to named individuals. While this can be a useful technique for drawing a participant in

to conversation some participants will find it awkward and really do want to stay silent.

3.4.3 Multiple summaries

At the opening of a pattern review the moderator normally asks for a reviewer to summarise the paper. The moderator is at liberty to ask for multiple summaries from different individuals. This can be another opportunity to encourage a silent one to speak up and express their thinking. Again the moderator might pose the question in such a way to encourage quieter review to speak up, e.g.

“Would someone who hasn’t given a summary before like to offer one?”

“Peter, what are the main points you see in the paper?”

3.4.4 Parking comments

At times loudmouths in the group can introduce a esoteric or metaphysical topic to the review group. When there are multiple, experienced, pattern reviewers in the group this can lead the discussion far from the paper and intimidate first timers.

Moderators might address this by deliberately “parking” a topic, for example:

“That is an interesting line of thought Andreas, maybe we could park it for now and address it later”

“Right now I’d like to stick to suggestions for improvement, maybe we can park that line of thinking and talk about it later”

“I suggest we hold that thought and continue it that conversation over lunch or in the bar”

In this context the term “to park” alludes to the practice of parking a car and leaving it unattended for a period of time. The car is still there when the driver returns after doing something else. Metaphorically questions are *park* and can be revisited later, as with a parked car.

Parking a question involves no loss of face but can serve as a useful filter for topics. Participants who think a topic is significant will ensure it is returned to, less significant topics might not be revisited – they remain parked, perhaps for discussion over lunch or beer.

4 Acknowledgements

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5 History

Date	Event
December 2011	First draft
April 2012	Intermediate EuroPLoP review updates
June 2012	EuroPLoP conference draft
July 2012	Post conference revisions: paper split into two

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