

# Workshop Leader Seminar

*Richard P. Gabriel*



*Distinguished Engineer, Sun Microsystems, Inc*



# Workshop Leader Roles

- Protector of authors
- Guide to the ritual
- Teacher



## Protector of Authors

- The workshop is a high-energy affair, potentially with emotional upheavals
- Western culture and certainly engineering and science have taught us that an appropriate response to almost any critical situation is to find a problem and fix it
- The moderator should keep a mental tab of the balance of positive and negative response an author is getting, and that requires getting started in this phase of the workshop
- The moderator should also check on the author, seeing whether there are any signs of distress, even in the positive feedback stage: Sometimes an author will expect particular responses here and will be upset not to hear them
- Keep in mind that the positive-feedback stage is the first critical response the author is hearing—and though it's intended to be positive, tone of voice, equivocation, qualification, and gaps can sound like criticism to the sensitive ear
- Under no circumstances should the moderator allow any negative or equivocating statements to be made during the positive-feedback part of the process. Not only is this not the time for it, but allowing such comments to leak into this part of the workshop weakens its effect in creating a safe setting for the author. The moderator should stop reviewers making “but” statements here—these are not positive comments



- The moderator needs to keep tight control of the workshop in the suggestions for improvement stage—things can easily get out of hand
- Suggestions for improvements is the phase of the workshop where the moderator needs to be paying close attention to the author's reactions, both by observing the author and by putting himself or herself in the author's place. The moderator has to be prepared to take control of the workshop, to reprimand people, or even stop the workshop if things are bad enough. The moderator must have enough self-confidence to stand up to anyone in the workshop
- Watch the author for signs of distress.
- Listen attentively for any hint of insult to the author.
- Don't hesitate if you suspect things are going awry.
- As a last resort, halt the workshop and talk to the author about what he or she wants to do.
- Above all, remember that throughout a review, you are the advocate for the author. He or she cannot speak, cannot defend himself or herself—it is up to you to do that. Whether you succeed or fail as a moderator depends on how well you represent the author's interests and feelings.



## Guide to the Ritual

- The moderator should order the pieces so that the best learning experience is possible
- Often it's best to start with a piece that is good and fairly far along though not finished, so that the workshop participants experience a thorough discussion of a piece that is neither too flawed—which would elicit perhaps a too-tough set of comments—nor too close to finished—which would spark a too-congratulatory discussion
- After the first piece or two are settled on—based on both where they are in their arc of maturity and how well discussion of them can teach the participants how to workshop—the remainder of the pieces should go in the order that makes the most pedagogical sense. For example, in a software patterns workshop, if the pieces as a whole contain patterns and pattern languages that could form an arc from code patterns to design patterns to architecture patterns to user-interface patterns and finally to application or user-visible patterns, then a good ordering might be from the inside, code patterns out to the user-visible patterns
- User-visible patterns and pattern languages last because they are less familiar to developers—this way the reviewers can learn how to workshop before encountering something odd



- The workshop as ritual requires an initial gesture as opening: The author reads aloud a selection of the work
- The workshop members can see and hear the author, can attach a person to the work
- If the magic of xenia will ever take over, it will at this moment
- The author's gift is made apparent and palpable; the author's own voice is attached to the gift
- How much to say other than to read the material—not much is the audience is supposed to be general, maybe a lot if it's for real experts
- One theory is: You should say nothing more than what is available to the reader
- The other theory is: Reviewers already had that experience, now the workshop is a different, priveleged forum
- Several readers? Useful if the workshop is heavy on writing craft—hear different rhythms, misreads, etc
- The overall goal of the workshop is to observe readers brought into contact with the piece
- Any special instructions for the group regarding a piece are given at the beginning of the workshop session for that piece
- Fly on the wall fantasy (try to do this, but the person is right there and you can see his/her reaction)



- Leaders shouldn't allow comments to be made to the author
- Author silent—if not, the moderator should first ask reviewers to back off and then ask the author if he or she wants to continue or not
- Maintaining the fiction of the author not being present and being polite are the two most important things to do
- Summarize: The moderator has two major problems to contend with in this part of the process: How to know when to cut off summaries, and what to do if it is clear no one really knows what the piece is about—diminishing returns; leader steps in and summarizes
- Get multiple summaries (EuroPLeP uses summaries by just one person)
- Positive feedback section is where the reviewers seem like they are giving a gift, which will kick in the gift effect
- By looking at the positives of a piece, the members of the workshop can begin to work on a deepened sense of what makes pieces good
- Suggestions for improvements should be as constructive as possible—some moderators don't allow pure criticism
- In suggestions for improvement the moderator should remind participants to couch their comments as concrete suggestions for how to make the work the best it can be, to refrain from talking directly to the author, and to treat the work as



fiction. The moderator could also remind the author to remain silent and not defend the work

- As a moderator—especially with technical workshop novices—view the suggestions for improvement stage as the time where you need to be vigilant and quick to restrain.
- In Clarifications, don't let the author defend the piece and don't let him/her get revenge
- In the final stage, the moderator should make a positive comment or ask someone to—something about the work that could have the effect of encouraging the author to continue with the work
- This is the closing envelope for the ritual





# Teacher

- The workshop is by its nature a relatively shallow review—very few individual reviewers, aside from the leader, spend a lot of time poring over the manuscript
- Leader provides depth (usually) and reviews provide breadth—statistical effect
- Each moderator reads each work in detail beforehand and prepares comments
- When the comments by the regular workshop members slow down or don't cover all the important points, the moderators step in
- At times they will use a more socratic method and ask leading questions
- When the group is not sure about links to other works, genres, and historical precedents, the moderators jump in to fill the gaps
- In short, the moderators have enough material of their own to fill the entire time for a piece, and they ration it out according to how the workshop is proceeding. In particular, he/she should be able to summarize, talk about the genre, talk about what the piece is trying to be, the strengths, and what needs to be worked on
- The best preparation for a moderator would be to read the work more carefully than a regular reviewer and to be prepared to step in with comments for all the phases if no one else does



- Being more deeply familiar with the work, such a moderator would be able to better synthesize and integrate the comments into something the author can use
- By being able to ask probing questions, the level of discussion could be considerably raised
- The leader should look at each piece as a teaching tool—connect it to the literature and other work, what is unique and valuable about the work, point to what others should try to “steal” from the work
- The leader should be able to tell the author exactly where the piece stands in the overall literature
- Don’t hesitate to reflect your own opinions of what’s good and not—authors are looking for someone to emulate, and maybe it’s you.



## General Advice

- Avoid suggested rewrites
- When things are going well, keep track of the time and move the discussion along.
- Create a balanced dynamic of participation.
- Ask those who think quickly and tend to speak up first to hold back.
- Encourage those who are quiet to give themselves a push and jump into the discourse. Let people know that everyone's opinion counts. Listen very carefully and be prepared to give thoughtful, insightful feedback on every piece of writing.