It’s an odd time to be a writer. Twenty-first century America is media-saturated and image-based. The internet regurgitates memes made of old television and movie clips. The most popular websites allow users to search for images and videos; and yet, because of this very technology, which seems to prefer the image over the written word, the publishing world is both evolving and thriving. Writers are able to find virtual communities. Online literary magazines and e-book publishing have virtually rewritten the rules of publication. Our image-based world doesn’t mean that writing isn’t important. Rather, writing and communication are evolving, as they always have. The writers of the twenty-first century are evolving, as well. They look backwards to learn the lessons of the past, yet remain cognizant of the shifting terrain of literary publishing, all the while focusing on the moment and honing their skills. As such, they occupy a liminal space between obsolete and indispensable.

If it’s an odd time to be a writer, then it’s certainly an odd time to be a creative writing teacher. Like writers themselves, creative writing teachers exist in a liminal space, too, somewhere between mentor and coach. Not quite a professor and not quite a personal critic, the creative writing teacher finds identity in both his or her work and his or her students. As English departments around the nation cut funding to writing programs, creative writing teachers are thrust into the unlikely and uncomfortable role of defending their very existence.

Of course, in many ways, it’s always been this way. For years, we’ve asked if poetry matters. Critics love to ask if creativity can be taught. Few took the fledgling Iowa Writers’ Workshop seriously when it appeared. But how could those detractors have foreseen the blossoming of MFA programs around the nation? Defending the discipline and advancing the art is one thing, but creative writing teachers today are asked to defend their validity. In this economy, why would anyone want to study creative writing? Indeed, with the frequent attacks on the liberal arts by certain detractors around the country, one might ask, “What is the value of studying literature or writing at all?”

I think the answer is simpler than it might appear. Our world is facing some rather complex problems: overpopulation, global climate change, war, poverty, debt, the list goes on. In order to solve these problems, future generations simply can’t do the same things we’ve been doing time and again. Future leaders have to find creative ways to solve increasingly complex problems.

Creative problem solving: this is a skill that every workshop teaches. The writer submits a poem to workshop, and during the process, the group talks about the work. We “hold it up to the light,” as Billy Collins says in “Introduction to Poetry,” and look at it “like a color slide.” We listen to it. We hear it. We turn it inside out. We do all of this to see how it works. The workshop demonstrates that in an art form as dynamic as poetry, there are no easy answers. When the poet sits down with her peers’ workshop responses, she knows that she’s going to have to make some difficult choices about revision. Jettison this comment. Embrace that idea. It’s all about problem solving. The process is similar in literature class or in a composition class.
As such, my teaching pedagogy is decidedly student-centered. In a creative writing classroom, the class makes a simple but monumental assumption: the students’ writing is as important as any “professional” writing that I bring into the class. Making the students’ writing the centerpiece allows the students to see themselves not as mere bystanders watching the literary greats parade by in an anthology. Instead, the students themselves become a part of this parade. They lead discussion. They often choose readings. They develop rubrics. They hold their peers accountable. By extension, participation is paramount. I tell them that without their input, the class simply cannot function. By encouraging small-group discussion and by offering plenty of low-risk writing assignments, I work to build an atmosphere of trust that will allow students to take intellectual risks.

I use the workshop approach in my writing classes, but my classes aren’t pure workshops. As an educator, I believe that a writing teacher has an obligation to lead students through all stages of the writing process. Focusing too much on the draft (as is often the case in pure workshop courses), a class forgets an important part of the writing process: generation. I like prompts and exercise. I like impromptu mini-essays and found poems. I love collaborative activities. For example, I’ll often ask my students to come to class with a preliminary draft of a poem and a pair of scissors. Then, in pairs, they cut the poem into stanzas and move them around, playing with order and juxtaposition, always searching for what the silence between stanzas reveals. The same exercise works well with prose, too, and I’ve used a version of it in my composition classes.

At the same time, however, I do not deny the importance of workshop. Workshop is a testing ground, a place where students can see the collaborative process of writing in action. As Brent Royster rightly observes, “Writing is both social and individual. As an alternative to the romantic ideal of the independent genius, the writer composes in response to specific environments and ideologies.” I love the energy of a busy classroom and the give-and-take of a writing workshop. I see this same energy develop in the give-and-take of a literature classroom.

As a creative writing teacher, I honestly believe that the students in my classes are incredibly talented and that among them, there might be another Elizabeth Bishop, Jorie Graham, Yusef Komunyakaa, or Richard Hugo. However, I also know the reality of the situation. Few of them will hit the publishing jackpot. Very few will wind up teaching creative writing. Many will attempt to find work teaching composition in an increasingly-saturated adjunct marketplace. Some will abandon writing altogether after college.

However, the skills they learn and hone in the creative writing classroom cannot be abandoned: the ability to look at a problem from several points of view, the discipline to work through a complicated text in order to understand it, the ability to work as a part of a team, the ability to retain one’s individual voice without being lost in the crowd. I like to believe that student writers walk out of my classroom with the audacity to believe that their creativity has a place in a world that attempts to reduce us all to a stream of data.

Ezra Pound told poets to “make it new” and to “go in fear of abstractions.” I think these pieces of advice could apply to anyone entering the world after college. We need thinkers who can innovate and think in specifics. And we also need artists, dreamers, and yes, poets. As a teacher of creative writing, I feel honored and challenged that in my class may sit that generation’s Virginia Woolf. But I also feel grateful to be in a room full of dynamic, capable, talented people who are developing the skills that will help them to change the world, no matter what career path they ultimately choose.