

# The Small Stuff

John Alberti

*Drawing on the author's experience as a graduate student in Mike Rose's practicum on teaching, the essay discusses the foundational importance of "small things," as Rose called them. The author describes how Rose's teaching provided him an opportunity to experience the "micro-evidence of care" in Rose's classroom interactions and the profound effect that such a "small thing" had on the author's formation as a teacher and scholar. In particular, the essay stresses the essential importance of focusing on the unique singularity of each student writer to inform how we think about teaching and how we think about the mission and purpose of writing programs.*

*I value the small stuff. The teacher who encourages a hesitant question; who remembers a student's name outside the classroom; who in discussing a paper suggests a book, a podcast, a movie; who spends an extra five minutes in a conference; who checks in with a student who had difficulty with the last assignment. These are everyday signs of commitment, micro-evidence of care (Mike Rose, "The Everyday Gestures of Justice").*

Fall term, 1982. It was the first day of our graduate practicum in how to teach a writing class (the course had a more official-sounding title, but that's really what it was). I was in my second year of graduate school in English, having come to UCLA after a first year at Cal Berkeley the year before that had led me to quit grad school altogether. No knock on Berkeley; I had some great teachers there, and the bay area is fantastic. I was just fed up with eighteen years of tests and grades, of constantly being evaluated to see if I remained worthy of further education. I had only come to graduate school in the first place because of a suggestion by my undergraduate Shakespeare professor. It was a real act of encouragement and kindness (see epigraph above), and although I knew nothing about graduate school, or where it might lead, I liked learning and I didn't have any other plans for what I might do next, so off to Berkeley I went.

A sobering encounter with corporate job prospects over the summer changed my mind about grad school, and so back I went, this time closer to home at UCLA. There I was offered the chance to become a teaching assistant leading my own composition course, a prospect I found both intriguing and terrifying. Like everyone, I had my own long history with all sorts

of teachers and teaching strategies, and I knew what I liked and what I didn't. Still, I didn't have any systematic beliefs about pedagogy. A chance encounter with *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* in an undergrad writing class had blown my mind a bit with its iconoclastic takes on formal education—especially the argument that grades deter learning and promote conformity—but when I walked into that practicum, I was looking for a plan and guidebook, or at the very least a survival strategy.

I discovered many things that first term: that there was a whole field of English studies called Composition and Rhetoric (who knew?), that there was a whole body of research and theorizing about what actually happens in our brains when we put pen to paper or fingers to keyboard, and that I was fascinated by it all. Mostly, though, I discovered Mike Rose, who was team teaching the practicum along with Carol Hartzog. At the time, Mike Rose was not yet “Mike Rose,” a name instantly recognized in our field and representing a body of work that has become indispensable for any teacher, writing or otherwise. He was 37 years old at the time, just two years removed from completing his own PhD at UCLA, and still on the cusp of publishing the articles and books that would change how we think about writing.

But really, even at that early time, Mike was still Mike (would always be Mike). His relaxed, welcoming vibe (and vibe is the right word; after all, we were both California guys); his ready smile changing to a look of genuine curiosity for what *you* had to say; the way he made everyone in that room felt like we belonged there, that we belonged in a classroom, whether as students or teachers. Or rather, understanding that students *are* teachers, and vice versa.

Like any dutiful composition student, let me provide a concrete example. Before we dove into pedagogical theory, assignment design, or facilitating student peer review (still a radical concept in 1982), Mike passed around a sheet of paper with some writing on it. And what writing it was (I wish I still had that handout, but we often don't recognize life-changing experiences except in retrospect). As a sample of “standard prose,” it was confusing. The syntax and grammar were unorthodox, the argument (if that's what it was) unclear or maybe nonexistent. I'm guessing I wasn't alone among my peers in wondering whether this wasn't some sort of trap or initiation ceremony, a “so you want to teach writing” gatekeeping exercise to see if we had what it takes. As Mike might say, those suspicions spoke to the ways years of formal education had taught us to always be wary, to always look for the hidden agenda behind every classroom challenge. As he also might say, those suspicions also spoke to how smart and savvy we were as well.

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I still don't know what gave me the courage to offer my two cents: maybe it was a leap of faith; maybe a leap of "what the hell." Or maybe it was that Mike Rose vibe in the room (that's where I'd put my money). When Mike asked us for our observations about the writing, I offered that depending on how I looked at it, this could either be the product of a person struggling with writing or a provocative piece of avant garde prose. I couldn't say for sure without knowing more about the writer and what they were trying to do.

I still stand by this observation, even if it doesn't strike me now quite as profound as I hoped it was in 1982. But what has stayed most with me is the way Mike took my contribution seriously, using it to invite all of us to question the snap judgments we are liable to make about any piece of student writing and to always stay in the moment in our encounters with student writers. I know my observation wasn't a shocking new idea to Mike. But it did represent the spark of my engagement with the text, a curiosity on my part about the question at hand that had the potential to lead me and maybe the rest of the class beyond anxiety about getting the answer right, looking smart, or trying to impress the teacher (although believe me, all those concerns were there when I first raised my hand) and into the work and pleasure of discovery and creativity.

In thinking back about that moment (and I still think back about it often), I've come to recognize that what I had feared was the unoriginality of my comment was beside the point. It could be the kind of observation we all nod our heads at and say, "that's true, I guess it could be either unintentionally bad or intentionally provoking," and then dismiss to get back to the "real" work of figuring out how we as teachers should respond to the writing, perhaps with the goal of making sure it didn't happen again. But Mike led us to consider the full implications of my insight, if I can call it that. As we pulled on the threads of the idea that specificity and context are everything, that each writer and each act of writing is unique and ultimately irreducible to a type or specimen, so many of our assumptions about formal education and traditional pedagogies began to unravel. This was a possibility both fraught and, to a group of young grad students with years of a kind of co-dependent relationship with teacherly approval and validation, exciting as well!

And really, if all that happened that day was we left that first class excited about the teaching of writing, well, mission accomplished. But wait, isn't this story just another example of that co-dependent need for approval I just referred to? Perhaps, but all I can say is, this time was different. Mike's response was validating, no doubt, but it also felt genuine, more like a peer excited about my idea than a teacher bestowing his blessing.

In the same way, over the years I have read and learned from so many progressive theorists about writing and literacy, but when I read *Lives on the Boundary*, it was . . . different. Both intensely personal and deeply theorized, both layered with “micro-evidence” and presenting a historic panorama of literacy instruction in America, *Lives* showed me a different way to be an academic. It wasn’t necessary to separate the personal from the professional; in fact, it was vital not to, despite the many messages to the contrary I had picked up as a student writer (and poignantly echoed in the question so many of my first-year writing students have asked me over the years, “Can I put my own ideas in my essay?”). His book exemplified how the work of the writing teacher is as much calling as it is profession, requiring both expertise and empathy, demanding that we bring our whole selves with us into the classroom.

So yes, Mike’s validation and encouragement meant the world to me; really, in so many ways it helped give the world to me. The gentle yet insistent reminder that no work we do is more important than our engagement with the individual writers in our classes, that every piece of writing we encounter is a kind of miracle, and that every piece of writing and every writer contains multitudes, to paraphrase Walt Whitman; these values became foundational for me. Just as important, Mike made it clear that those writers included us. To Mike, we weren’t just another group of new TAs ready to bear the load of teaching first year writing so the tenured faculty didn’t have to. Each of us represented potentials that even we didn’t realize, potentials to be good teachers, scholars, and even future WPAs, yes, but also to follow the example of Mike, to see our own radical potentials to change the world by providing the space for other writers to grow and flourish (not a bad vision statement for a writing program, by the way).

As Mike insists in the epigraph, changing the world involves the small as well as the large, the attention to each student in all their singularity and the absolute necessity that we keep that attention at the heart of the larger structures we build to foster that moment, whether in a course syllabus or a writing program curriculum. Call it the Zen of Mike. In my own career, I’ve used the confidence to try new things and challenge the status quo that I learned from Mike to work with others in creating large structural change, as when we rebuilt the writing program at my current university, and I served as the interim director for that program (and attended the WPA Summer Conference and Workshop at Purdue, another life-changing event).

That large scale work, the stuff that goes on a CV, is important, of course. But in the end, it’s not any more important than the small stuff, those “everyday signs of commitment” that flow naturally when we approach each

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piece of student writing with a genuine curiosity about the uniqueness of that writing and writer, even after decades of teaching; expressing delight at a clever turn of phrase in a first-year essay; recognizing the bravery it takes for a student to question a long-held belief in a response to a class reading; letting another student know how their discussion board post made me challenge my own perspective about a film we were studying. The effects of these small things are impossible to assess in any systematic way, but as my own experience showed me, they matter as much as any carefully crafted assignment or course design. And if we lose our focus on the small things, the big things we make won't matter.

In the following years, even as Mike Rose became “Mike Rose,” those small moments with him continued. I would occasionally run into Mike at conferences, for example, and no matter how long it had been since we last met, he would instantly recognize me, remember where I was teaching, and ask me how it was going. Another small thing, maybe, but also astonishing. It’s a quality of concern and caring that you can’t fake. I know scores of us have been inspired and motivated by Mike’s writing, but those of us who knew Mike are especially lucky, because we experienced those ideas and beliefs in person, felt their power, and pledged ourselves to follow his example. Because of that small moment in Mike’s class, a moment that was critical to my making it all the way to the PhD and to my career, I was emboldened to believe in myself and what I had to offer, to think both big and small, and to find a life I had scarcely imagined for myself before that day in 1982. As Mike taught us, that small stuff isn’t small at all.

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#### WORKS CITED

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**John Alberti** is chair of English at Northern Kentucky University, where he has taught since 1991. He has written two first year writing textbooks and several articles on writing in the digital age.