

My Mike Rose: The Library, Mom, and Critical Reading in *Lives on the Boundary*

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This piece captures the author's personal experience with Mike Rose that occurred as a by-product of her finding, more or less by chance, and reading Lives on the Boundary, a book that captures important features of academic critical literacy of students then and now. To honor his legacy, writing studies faculty and all others in higher education must work to develop students' ability to read, write, speak and listen effectively, efficiently and critically.

I was in my local public library, browsing the New Books shelves, and saw the name Rose and the title *Lives on the Boundary* among the biographies. “Is that *my* Mike Rose?” I thought to myself. What is he doing here, in the public library, on the biography shelf? I took it home and, like everyone else, loved it. And raved about it every chance I got, including to my mother, who, at 86, was still living independently in Florida. Always an active reader, she went to her library and got it; she read it and loved it too. I had read Rose’s other work earlier, and I think I had been an anonymous reviewer for his CCC article with Glynda Hull (“This Wooden Shack Place: The Logic of an Unconventional Reading”) so I recognized the style. In *Lives*, which won more than one award as I recall, Mike tells his own story in a compelling way, but then uses his emotional grasp on the reader to make an equally compelling argument about the need for changes in our system of education and our treatment of students. His argument is still valid today. Subsequently, I saw Mike at a conference and told him this story. He asked me to write down my mother’s address and sent her a signed copy. She was surprised and delighted. That’s just the kind of guy Mike Rose was. While I wanted to tell this story, I also wanted to show that what Rose says in *Lives* specifically about critical reading still needs our attention more than thirty years later.

In his chapter “Entering the Conversation” where Rose describes his early college experiences developing skills in critical literacy, it is impossible not to get drawn into his story of visiting a kind of intellectual club that he was ill-equipped to join. With the help of his teachers at Loyola in Los Angeles, he made his way in, largely through developing an ability to read academic texts. His teachers offered guidance through questions that led to what we currently call “deep reading” (Sullivan et al.) and vocabulary development combined with a lot of support and encouragement (cf.

Rose 158). Rose makes clear his own problems then and those for students now. Recent research shows that students' reading issues are still very much with us (Baron; Culver and Hutchens; Wolf) and have far-reaching implications: college completion, workforce readiness, democratic participation, and social justice (Noble). I have pointed repeatedly to students' "don't, won't, can't" problems with reading: they have limited reading experience in all their lives before college; they resist substantive reading of all kinds, but especially textbooks and many kinds of nonfiction prose, despite reading and writing for hours on social media, and they really can't do the kind of close, deep, critical reading of extended texts on paper or online that is essential to their success in school, careers, and as citizens in a democracy.

Rose offers a focused definition of critical literacy that is urgently needed, now more than ever:

. . . framing an argument or taking someone else's argument apart, systematically inspecting a document, an issue or an event, synthesizing different points of view, applying a theory to disparate phenomena and so on. . . . Ours is the first society in history to expect so many of its people to be able to perform these very sophisticated literacy activities. (188)

Again using his own story, he explains that even in his doctoral dissertation, instead of writing an analytical description of his methodology, he wrote the story of his project. His adviser accused him of writing *Travels with Charley* instead of a dispassionate account of his research (189). He does not say how he responded to this critique, but did, after all, get a degree. He goes on from this point to show that error and backtracking to more familiar strategies are indicators of progress and effort. All of us have students who can tell a story, summarize a chapter (maybe), or report an event, but we do not make sufficient use of evidence-based teaching of strategies that equip students to move ahead to read and think critically. Are graduate programs preparing faculty to offer such strategies in the classroom, and do we know what they are?

The first question is one I have answered elsewhere in one word, NO (Horning). A review of a national sample of graduate programs in writing studies shows very few courses in the teaching of postsecondary critical reading anywhere. The second question is more complicated, but new studies are emerging that show the kinds of approaches that make a difference in students' critical skills. For example, the Stanford History Education researchers have found that lateral reading significantly improves critical judgment of online materials (Wineburg et al.; Breakstone et al.). The well-known CRAAP acronym (Currency, Relevance, Authority, Accuracy,

and Purpose) also has a research basis, but it requires teaching key skills to make sure students can evaluate for these criteria. Students must also have strategies to *do* the evaluation, like the afore-mentioned lateral reading, which entails going beyond looking at a website itself to move laterally to see comparable information, check facts, and investigate claims made. It's not enough, then, just to teach the lateral reading approach or the acronym; information literacy is also needed to understand where information comes from and how it is accessed (Head et al.).

This kind of fuller understanding the online landscape is essential because it reveals the “algorithms of oppression” (Noble) and other ways that our access to information is being controlled and curated, leading to what one technology journalist has called the “infocalypse,” defined as “the increasingly dangerous and untrustworthy information ecosystem within which most humans now live” (Schick 10). Classroom-based, evidence-based approaches are presented in the CCCC Position Statement on the Role of Reading in College Writing Classrooms (<https://cccc.ncte.org/cccc/the-role-of-reading>). But while these focused strategies are definitely needed, to follow Rose's approach, faculty must attend closely to students as people with complex lives. It is his stories of working with individual students, attending to their personal needs as well as their intellectual and critical literacy development, that made everyone love this book.

As but one example of his teaching philosophy, Rose makes a particularly poignant case for what we would now call Intersectionality, telling the story of a boy named Harold Morton whom Rose worked with in his second year in the Teacher Corps program at USC. Harold was a fifth grader who had lots of challenges with reading and writing that appeared to have a basis in some physical or psychological problems. When Rose started to build a relationship with Harold, he began to do better in school. When he visited Harold's home, met his mother and learned that his father had abandoned the family and was in jail at the time, many of Harold's problems began to make sense (Rose 114-127). Despite a lot of testing, assorted diagnoses and ideas for how to work with him, Rose saw that “Harold was made stupid by his longing, and his folder full of tests could never reveal that” (127). And yet, Rose had seen that Harold was perfectly capable of doing schoolwork, just needing attention and support.

To help this youngster, Rose relied less on specific teaching techniques or approaches and more on time and attention (116-118). While fifth grade is a long way from our classrooms and programs, this story, along with Rose's own make clear the importance of seeing all of the factors that affect students' performance. In other examples with older students, like those in the veterans' program where Rose taught for a time, he used a more focused approach, moving the students, step-by-step, from summary to

classification, to comparison and finally to analysis (143–146). He points out that this particular group of students had complicated lives and experiences but little contact with academic texts and ideas, so providing connections they could grasp was a key to developing their critical literacy abilities. His example of Willie (146–148), one of the veterans who had spent time in prison and read a great deal, makes clear how a lifetime of experiences in combination with careful teaching can, through a personal and human connection, open a door into literacy, an education and a different life outcome.

This concept of Intersectionality, as presented by UCLA and Columbia law professor Kimberlé Crenshaw, captures this point: critical reading is an essential and urgently-needed ability we should be teaching aggressively to all students, but it overlaps with and is affected by everything else going on in their lives. Rose makes clear that we must do this work in the context of students' lives as they are, especially in these times as our lives have been complicated by the pandemic and all its implications. Now, perhaps more than ever, his message is that faculty must really believe in students' ability to do the work as he saw with Harold, and give them both the substantive tools and the needed personal support. The analytical and evaluative skills can and should be taught, maybe with the help of those faculty librarians who have deep knowledge of information literacy. All faculty, but especially first-year writing faculty who teach almost all college students, have a specific responsibility to develop students' skills in critical reading for authority, accuracy, and for bias of all kinds.

The thing about *Lives* is that Rose pulls readers (including Mom and me) into the story of his own education and that of others in a way that is particularly appealing for anyone involved in education (like me) or who cares about students, teaching and learning (as my mother did, maybe because of me). But in his time and ours, he rightly shows how an education in critical literacy is urgently needed. As he says at the end of *Lives*, to reach this goal we will need many blessings: "A philosophy of language and literacy that affirms diverse sources of linguistic competence and deepens our understanding of the ways class and culture blind us to the richness of those sources" (238). Working to prepare faculty appropriately to focus on this goal and making it central in our programs and courses would surely do justice to his legacy.

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