Stepping Back to Step Forward: A Tribute to Mike Rose

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The following article provides a narrative which details how Mike Rose positively influenced the author's practices, specifically as they relate to assessment and grading. The author first details his negative experiences with traditional grading as a high school teacher. Then, as he prepared to teach first-year writing courses at the college level, he discusses how Rose's ideas from Lives on the Boundary on the negative consequences of labels and judgments led him to Asao Inoue's work on labor-based grading. Lastly, he describe the positive impact that labor-based grading—and Mike Rose—has had on his teaching.

As I stepped into my first 10th grade English class as a student teacher, I was really excited. I was about to engage in the process of helping students discover powerful ideas through reading, and I'd assist them in critically thinking about important topics. Above all else, though, I was excited to teach writing. As a student in college, with the help of some truly wonderful English professors, I found my writerly voice, a discovery that allowed me to see just how powerful words can be. I wanted students—students like me who hated writing in high school, who feared putting words down on paper or screen for worry of sounding unintelligent—to see that they, too, had a writerly voice, albeit one that wasn't realized yet. Yes, the teaching of writing would be magical. Except, it mostly wasn't.

Whenever I wanted to talk to students about their writing—craft moves, purpose, expressing ideas—most would, inevitably, shift the conversations to focus on their grades, and, specifically, on the labels associated with those grades. F grades left students deflated and defeated—like they, themselves, were failures. D and C grades weren't much better and hardly inspired students to challenge themselves to write more, especially since those letters were accompanied with notions of being *remedial* and *average*.

I finished my student teaching feeling disappointed and unsure if I could make any real impact as an educator. Then, through a course reading in my teaching credential program, I discovered Mike Rose and his book *Lives on the Boundary*. Profound, brilliant, hopeful, and inspiring. Like many reading his work, I connected so strongly with his ideas, with his vision of a democratic education, one where every student belonged.

I completed my teaching credential program, and I decided to continue my schooling by pursuing an MA in English with an emphasis in rhetoric and writing studies. During my studies, I had an opportunity to teach

first-year writing as a teaching associate. I took the opportunity. As I prepared my courses, a particular passage from *Lives on the Boundary*, because of my prior experiences in high school, kept on circling in my mind. Rose ended his book by arguing that the classroom can be a truly transformative place, but we, educators, need "a pedagogy that encourages us to step back and consider the threat of the standard classroom and that shows us, having stepped back, how to step forward to invite a student across the boundaries of that powerful room" (238). These words by Rose signaled to me that I had to really examine my previous practices as a teacher, and I had to do some thoughtful, meaningful, reflective work to try to find—and remove—the biggest threat that I had observed in the classroom. The answer, in my mind, was clear. The biggest threat to students was grades.

And even though Rose didn't speak specifically about grades and assessment, he did warn about the consequences of labels and judgments, which mainly stem from grades: "[T]hose judgments, accurate or not, affect the curriculum they receive, their place in the school, the way they're defined institutionally" (128). And students of color, multilingual students, students from low-income backgrounds—populations which, historically, have been in the institutional margins—often receive the harshest of judgments and labels. Students, as Rose powerfully noted, are sometimes powerless to stand outside of the definitions assigned to them through the various labels they've endured (128). And teachers, though try as they might, have a hard time moving beyond "established institutional perceptions" of students (128). By reading this in *Lives on the Boundary*, I started to gain an understanding that traditional assessment practices had to, in one way or another, be removed so as to not damage students' identities as learners. With this understanding, I realized that if I wanted myself and my students to move beyond reductive terms like remedial, illiterate, deficient—caused mainly by traditional assessment practices—I'd have to shift towards an alternative assessment method, one that was far more compassionate and equitable.

This was the "stepping back and stepping forward" work that had to be done. Therefore, with Rose's words guiding me, I searched for an assessment method that would allow me to see students as people, and one that would allow students to not worry about their identity through a grade or label. After reading Rose's work, I encountered Asao Inoue's *Labor-Based Grading Contracts Building Equity and Inclusion in the Compassionate Writing Classroom*. Inoue argues for teachers of writing to use labor-based grading, an alternative assessment practice that eschews letter grades, percentages, or any other evaluative mark, from students' writing and other work. The focus in this grading system is instead on providing students with

meaningful written feedback, on being equitable, and antiracism (Inoue). In the article "Theorizing Failure in US Writing Assessments," Inoue also asserts that labor-based grading, because it doesn't use traditional measures of quality, could also potentially "avoid the damaging psychological effects . . . that grading by quality can cause many students, most notably students of color, working-class students, and multilingual students" (345). In many ways, reading Rose's work before reading Inoue's was perfect, because it primed me to see just how important it was to set up conditions in the classroom that weren't so focused on ranking and evaluating, on making judgments about people's abilities through a damaging mark. I was curious if labor-based grading would help honor students as people. It seemed like it did.

In my courses, labor-based grading allowed students to focus on their writing and not get so hung up on their grades. I remember in my high school classes, getting to the end of the year, and hoping that students had shifted their thinking and cared more about writing than grades. But that never happened. The pull of those evaluative marks was too strong, and students were always striving for the "perfect" grade, so they, themselves, could be perfect, perhaps ideas rooted in negative experiences. But in my college courses, those ideas didn't seem to enter the picture. In fact, some students, especially those who had been the most hurt by traditional grading practices, were able to forge new writerly identities, ones that weren't tethered to ideas of being deficient or inadequate. Students found, despite the negative labels previously assigned to them by academic institutions, they had a voice, and that they could use words to express powerful ideas, enact change, and tell moving stories. They were no longer burdened by the looming grade (and by the labels behind those grades) hanging over their shoulders. They could write and expect only feedback to help push their ideas forward.

Rose so often centered student voices in his scholarship, and I'd like to do the same here with a student's thoughts on labor-based grading from my class: "With labor-based grading, this is the first time I have ever cared about my writing." With other reflective comments on labor-based grading similar to this, it's evident to me that students felt like their words and ideas mattered, like they were being seen and heard—just as Rose surely saw his students.

Through his scholarship, Rose continually communicated his belief to educators, administrators, parents, and academic institutions about how students are so much more than the labels which are often attached to them. Instead of reducing students down to a quantitative mark, he hoped we might embrace education as a truly human endeavor. And to notice that

every single student that walks through our door has their own potential to do something truly wonderful. In my courses, students and I are able to focus on writing without preoccupying ourselves with labels. In this way, I believe I am fulfilling, and extending, Rose's vision through my teaching.

Mike Rose no longer being with us leaves an immense hole in our educational landscape. Like many of us, I look to honor, celebrate, and extend his work in meaningful ways. I am forever thankful for Mike Rose and the positive impact he has had—and continues to have—on my teaching. I am grateful for his immense spirit and belief in the power of education. His kindness, generosity, and hopeful ideas will, no doubt, continue to influence our work in profound ways.

Works Cited

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