Mike Rose: Insights from the Classroom

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While many of the articles in this special issue focus on contributions Mike Rose made through his scholarly work, this essay provides a discussion of his work in the classroom. Drawing on a graduate seminar taught in Fall 1986, when Rose was serving as a visiting professor at Carnegie Mellon University, the article explores key aspects of Rose's approach to designing and teaching a course.

I met Mike Rose in August 1986, when I was a new graduate student in the doctoral program at Carnegie Mellon University and Mike had joined the faculty for the year as a visiting professor. The class I took from him that fall and the conversations we had over the course of that year shaped who I would become as a scholar and, even more directly, as a teacher. In retrospect, the time I spent with Mike played a critical role in launching a career that I had given little consideration to pursuing prior to my decision to apply to Carnegie Mellon's rhetoric program the previous spring.

I'm certainly not alone in recognizing the impact of Mike Rose's work on teaching and learning. The articles in this special issue offer powerful testimony to the enduring legacy of his scholarly work, collegiality, and generosity. They underscore what those of us who know Mike and his scholarship (I am still struggling with the verb tense) have long understood: that he gave willingly to his students, to his colleagues (and his notion of colleague is broad and inclusive), and to the field. His scholarship has shaped the teaching of writing for more than four decades. His books and articles have expanded the reach of writing studies far beyond our discipline. And the example he set as a caring and committed teacher and researcher, borne of his own early struggles with learning and enhanced by the connections he made with so many of us, will long be held up as an ideal that many of us will strive to emulate, even as we see, through the words he shared with us, how difficult that will be to achieve.

Mike understood well that we can move forward best as a community—or, perhaps, as many communities with congruent goals. He grounds much of his writing in the connections we share as individuals and as a society, in research reports such as "Rigid Rules, Inflexible Plans, and the Stifling of Language: A Cognitivist Analysis of Writers Block" (1980), historically grounded analyses such as "The Language of Exclusion: Writing Instruction at the University" (1985), commentaries in *Inside Higher Ed* and *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, and in the books for which he is best known

and which so clearly show his connections to individuals and the challenges they face, such as *Lives on the Boundary* (1989), *The Mind at Work: Valuing the Intelligence of the American Worker* (2004), and *Why School? Reclaiming Education for All of Us* (2012). His focus on individual struggle illuminates the larger challenges we face as educators and as a society. In a way, Mike Rose can be seen as a series of moments—each important, each enduring, and each resonant of the challenges we face as teachers, learners, and as members of a complex and often difficult society.

While attention to the impact of Mike's work on the field, his generous interactions with colleagues, and his concern for his students runs through the articles in this collection, what isn't as apparent is his impact on the many students he taught over his long and productive career. In August 1986, I became one of those students when I enrolled in Mike's graduate seminar at Carnegie Mellon. I sometimes joke that I'm an accidental professor, having given up a career as a professional writer to follow my wife from the Twin Cities to Pittsburgh, where she had enrolled in Carnegie Mellon's master's program in professional writing. I was naïve, uninformed, and unprepared for what I would face, so the idea of enrolling in CMU's doctoral program didn't faze me—at first. I thought, for example, that working as a graduate teaching assistant implied that I would be supporting an experienced instructor—not teaching my own class. I was unaware that getting a master's degree before enrolling in a doctoral program would have been a good idea. And my understanding of what it means to write and to be a writer were more aligned with expressivism than the cognitive rhetoric that was a central concern of the program.

In many ways, the faculty I worked with that first semester offered me a lifeline. I was in over my head, especially when I contrasted my preparation with that of the other members of my entering class. But Chris Neuwirth, Richard Young, and Mike Rose helped me avoid drowning in a wave of new and often conflicting ideas. By the end of that semester, I had learned not only enough to understand our then-emerging field but had also begun to understand, through their example, what it meant to teach well.

I don't remember as clearly as I'd like the content of the discussions we had in Mike's seminar. Although the readings he assigned were ultimately important to my development as a scholar, my lack of background as a teacher and my unfamiliarity with the scholarship in our field made it difficult to understand how our readings fit together. But I remember the building in which the course was taught–Baker Hall, a brick and stone building that reflected the hedged bet Andrew Carnegie made when he founded Carnegie Tech, follows the slope of the hill along Schenley Park, which would have allowed Carnegie to repurpose the building as an assembly line

had the fledgling institution failed. And I remember our seminar room, with a large square table surrounded by chairs holding a dozen students, a set of mismatched posters on its walls, and a bank of windows overlooking the quad one floor below. And, most vividly, I remember the way Mike taught. It's something I remember whenever I plan a class; I can't recall planning a class without reflecting, at one point or another, on his approach to teaching. When I teach best (or, at least, when I think I've taught well), I almost always find myself reflecting on how close I've come to the example he set.

Mike's (Unintended) Lessons on Teaching

Mike's seminar was titled "Literacy, Cognition, and the Teaching of Writing." His syllabus opened with the following description:

> Our research and our teaching are built on assumptions about literacy and cognition, and the purpose of this seminar is to consider, from multiple perspectives, some of the assumptions that currently seem most prevalent in our professional literature.

Mike's course wasn't about teaching. He certainly didn't set it up as some sort of master class that could shape his students' pedagogy. But it had a profound effect on me, and the lessons I learned during my first semester as a graduate student have shaped a career that has now spanned more than three decades.

The first thing I learned from Mike was how to approach a course. Mike was true to his values. He rejected the concept of deficit learning and the medical analogies that so often accompany it, and he made his values clear through the readings he chose and the way in which he framed issues during class. As Kristy Lyles Crawley observes in her article in this special issue, Mike didn't view students' needs as a source of deficiency, but rather as "a foundation for building a network of support through accessible resources, peers, tutors, educators, and college services." While I don't have examples of other classes he taught to compare with my experience, I saw a strong emphasis on inclusion, unfailing respect for students as individuals with varied backgrounds and needs, and a welcoming attitude that repeatedly fostered thorough exchanges of ideas.

The second lesson I took from Mike's seminar was the care needed to plan an effective course. He was deeply committed to dialogue, both in the classroom and in his selection of course readings. In his syllabus, he explained that the course would be broken up into five sections—Current Issues, Historical Perspectives, Cognition and Literacy, Sociopolitics and

Literacy, and Developmental Perspectives—and that two related readings would set the stage for discussion of each section:

> I begin each section with a pair of articles, a couplet. Sometimes the reason for the pairing is pretty obvious, sometimes less so – but in either case, each article plays off the other. My hope is that the coupling will make a few sparks fly, not set a rigid agenda for the section following the pair, but generate stimulating issues that have direct bearing on the teaching and researching of writing in our time, and to which we'll return at various points in the course.

For the sociopolitics and literacy section, for example, we read Lynn Quitman Troyka's "Perspectives on Legacies and Literacy in the 1980s" and David Bartholomae's "Inventing the University."

Mike's course design provided me with three interrelated examples of effective teaching: the importance of developing a reading list that supports the creation of engaging activities and assignments, the important role played by thoughtful responses to student work, and the power of silence. We spent time during class writing in response to prompts he provided, and then either building on that work in a formal assignment or sharing our ideas during discussion. In my notes from the class, I found a passage that captures one of the important tensions that seems to have motivated his work as a scholar: "Key conflict: Researchers' penchant for problem finding vs practitioners' need for answers." While I don't recall the specific context of that discussion, I suspect it also reflects one of his teaching goals—and perhaps the working-class background we share: linking the work we do as researchers with the work we do as educators.

I've long tried to emulate the way Mike ran his seminar. I've often failed. But the goals were clear to me then and now: Set up the discussion; embrace the power of silence to avoid getting in the way of a good class discussion; and intervene productively but respectfully when appropriate. I have a clear image of Mike kicking back in his chair as a group of eager graduate students and faculty got into it. He used (his) silence as a powerful teaching tool. And it seems clear that this approach continued to shape his teaching. In his article in this special issue, Shane Wood quotes Mike's observation in the first episode of Pedagogue about the importance of listening: "I can't tell you what a fundamental pedagogical skill listening has become for me over the decades… I mean think of it, how many people do you know that really listen to you when you sit down to talk with them?"

Mike engaged in active learning long before it was an educational commonplace. Certainly, and I speak as someone who directed my university's teaching and learning center for eight years, active learning is far from a

new idea. Our field, of course, has long relied on it. Yet the classroom metaphors we rely on—and this was particularly true in the 1980s—seldom center it. Before it was a hot "new" idea, however, Mike used it in much the same way that Chris Neuwirth used it in her hands-on, computer-supported classroom. As I look at his syllabus, it's quite evident that his use of active learning was an intentional act, not simply something he'd come up with on the spur of the moment. It was, effectively, an invitation to do more than listen and learn. It was an opportunity to start thinking like scholars, something he treated us as from the start. Seeing it in use in a standard classroom setting was eye-opening, and often challenging, especially when he asked us to write during class and share what we wrote. It's a practice I've used ever since.

The final lesson I took from what I now think of as Mike's master class on teaching was how to expand the classroom. His syllabus included a brief message about reaching him outside the classroom: "Office Hours. Plenty of them." Mike taught me by example the importance of being a human being rather than the embodiment of an institutional role. Because of my lack of experience in the field, I took advantage of his office hours. He was available and helpful. And while his temporary office was decorated sparely, it appeared to me as a warm and welcoming space. In our discussions, he helped me understand some of the issues I was facing as a novice scholar. He helped me begin to understand the profession. And he laid a foundation that has allowed me to continue to grapple with complex issues that have become central discussions in our field, including antiracism, classism, and critical language awareness, issues taken up by several of the authors in this issue.

What I took away from our conversations outside the classroom has shaped my thinking through a career than is now approaching its fourth decade. Mike's willingness to spend time with people is a theme running through this special issue. It proved particularly helpful for a new graduate student who was trying to make sense of a field he wasn't prepared to join.

Mike's work as a teacher set a standard that I've tried to meet ever since I took his course. His attention to detail, his preparation, his willingness to allow discussions to develop—and in particular his willingness to remain silent—have shaped my approach to course design. Similarly, his use of active learning and his availability to students have been deeply instructive. I would not teach in the way I do now had I not taken his class. I can imagine that the many other members of our field who took courses from him would offer similar testimony. His class set me on a path I've never regretted following.

A Closing Note

Nearly two decades after I'd taken Mike's seminar, I learned from a colleague at Bedford/St. Martins (which, disclaimer, publishes my textbooks) approached Mike about publishing a collection of his work. Mike seemed reluctant to do so, and they were willing to respect that decision. It seemed to me, however, that it would be a missed opportunity to share his work, some of which was available only through subscription-based journals, so I offered to get in touch with Mike about the collection. That renewed a connection and, really, a friendship that had lapsed as I had worked through the tenure and promotion process. After he agreed to work on the book, I was asked to review it. Shortly after receiving the review, Mike reached out to me:

> I wanted to take a moment to thank you for reviewing my new book with Bedford. I was reluctant to do it at first—couldn't see its relevance—but once I finally began, I got enthusiastic about it. Thanks for your kind words in reviewing it. Fortunately, I've got plenty of time to revise, so I'll be using your thoughtful suggestions. I am deeply grateful for your time and smarts. See you in San Francisco. (personal email, March 14, 2005)

My response was to thank him for doing it. I wish now that I'd thanked him more directly for everything I learned from him. His voice has been an important one not only in my professional and personal lives but also in those of so many others. It's a voice that reflects a sense of justice that goes beyond advocacy for any single group, one that focuses on the potential of each person. It's a voice that will continue to have an impact on the field, not only as an individual scholar but also as one working in harmony with the generations of scholars that preceded, worked with, and will follow him.

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