

The Reading Labs: Pedagogical History and Humane Design

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This brief essay describes Reading Labs, a pedagogical intervention implemented to support novice social science students with reading complex primary legal documents and composing analytic summaries and other collegiate writing. In this overview, the authors highlight the social nature of learning: how meanings were negotiated among participants deciphering laws and court opinions, how questions and peer feedback helped sharpen arguments and voice in students' written work. In so doing, the authors evoke Mike Rose's own work in writing programs across levels, relying on small, intimate groupings of students, serious regard given to their intellectual efforts including errors, and a pedagogy marked by encouragement and gentle questioning.

Vilma, a Mexican-American young woman and first-gen college student in a pre-service teacher pathway, reads aloud from the excerpted opinion of *McLaurin v. Oklahoma State Regents* (1950). Her peers, Mackenzie -- a white, female, first-gen college student from a rural stretch of the state, and Julius, a male Marine veteran identifying as mixed race (white and Filipino), follow along. The three have skimmed the opinion independently, and are joining this *Reading Lab* to more deeply engage with the text and clarify questions from their first reading.

Appellant's case represents, perhaps, the epitome of that need, for he is attempting to obtain an advanced degree in education, to become, by definition, a leader and trainer of others. Those who will come under his guidance and influence must be directly affected by the education he receives. Their own education and development will necessarily suffer to the extent that his training is unequal to that of his classmates. State-imposed restrictions which produce such inequalities cannot be sustained[...] (*McLaurin* 641)

In ensuing discussions across Reading Labs, Vilma, Mackenzie, and Julius connect this reading to previous conversations about the 14th Amendment, which underlies this and other desegregation rulings. They debate the distinctions between *privileges* and *immunities* in legal discourse. In probing the intent and material reality of the term *equality* across texts, they interweave their own experiences—with sexism, under-resourced high schools, leaving behind homogenous hometowns to study in diverse urban

campuses—and come to embody “the real stuff of belonging to an academic community” with “a richer, more transactive model of classroom discourse” (Hull & Rose 297). Their subsequent writing attests to “dynamic involvement in generating and questioning knowledge” and “a complete, active, struggling engagement with the facts and principles of a discipline, an encounter with the discipline’s texts and the incorporation of them into one’s own work, the framing of one’s knowledge within the myriad conventions that help define a discipline” (Rose 359). With Manuel, the designer and primary instructor of the course, and Luis, a novice professor apprenticing to assume its instruction, sitting at the table but only interjecting sporadically with probing questions, the students demonstrate their ingenuity and deepen their analytic capacities by teasing apart complex legal writing and making connections to their future teaching.

But for these Reading Labs modeled after the writing and teaching of Mike Rose, this writing-intensive course examining human dignity and the educational process through landmark legal texts might overwhelm students like Vilma, Mackenzie, and Julius. Vilma herself expressed as much when she recalled the first week’s assignments, “If those were the type of readings that we were going to get, I was not going to be able to complete the class with a good grade.” She credited the Reading Labs with her success, “because they helped me understand, and also by having other people in here like [Julius] and [Mackenzie] and all them. It made me understand different perspectives...other points of view, what they caught and I didn’t catch.”

About one month after this Reading Lab session, the students were to submit their culminating writing assignment: their pedagogical song, an intertextual essay braiding together their own philosophy of teaching with the primary documents encountered throughout the course. Though an individual assignment, the Reading Labs afforded opportunities for collaboration and experimentation among students crafting their essays. In the mold of Mike Rose’s exhortations for writing instruction, assignments were cumulative, such that analytic summaries of individual cases built up to this ultimate synthesis between the legal, historical, and personal aspects of schooling in US society and students’ lives. In-class writing and discussion of writing were plentiful thanks to the Reading Labs, allowing students to attempt phrasings and passages in their work they might not undertake independently and to seek feedback from each other and from the two professors in attendance. Discussions of error were always in the context of students’ writing, attending to their intended purpose and the textual influences they were summoning. Through such cycles of experimentation and feedback, students in the Reading Labs were able to appreciate “new ways

of thinking about how language is used, what it does, and how an effect is achieved” (Rose 262).

It was through exchanges such as these that Vilma wavered and then decided to include *consejos* (advice) in Spanish passed down through her family alongside matching segments of landmark opinions, “Morals are spoken by *mi abuelo* [my grandfather] . . . ‘*Y sobre todo, nunca humilles a nadie*’ [Above all, never humiliate anyone]...they shouldn’t need to be stated by the Warren Court, ‘To separate them from others of similar age and qualifications solely because of their race generates a feeling of inferiority as to their status in the community that may affect their hearts and minds” (*Brown* 494).

Indeed, despite her early self-doubt and insufficient high school preparation, Vilma’s song masterfully accomplished the dual tasks of incisive legal, sociological, and personal analysis alongside complex writing for academic audiences. In its conclusion, the piece even mirrored the Court’s reasoning in *McLaurin*,

Without the occurrence of *Brown v. Board of Education*, I may not be able to pursue the career path that I am currently on. I would not be able to discuss *Plessy v. Ferguson* or *Roberts v. City of Boston* with my classmates of lighter skin complexity [sic]. I probably would not have been able to even enhance my education thus far. Yet, through the *Brown* rulings I am able to chase after my dream, which will give me the opportunity to provide my students with the proper tools to create who they will become.

Vilma’s writing, emerging from her Reading Labs conversations, poignantly inserts her within the narrative of US history as a beneficiary of progress to date and an agent of changes still to come.

Though Vilma and others like her never studied with Mike Rose, they can be thought of as the “downstream” beneficiaries of his thinking, instruction, and intellectual generosity. With respect to the adaptive design of an educational environment, the Reading Labs “rhyme” with Rose’s graduate writing courses—the intimacy of small numbers with all participants learning in some way, the serious attention paid to the thinking of students grappling with difficult texts, the encouragement communicated via a light pedagogical touch, and the possibility, often actualized, of young people walking away from an intellectual encounter more expert than when they arrived.

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