

Reminding Us Why We Are Here: Mike Rose's Legacy for Basic Writing

Lynn Reid

In this essay, the author explores why, over a career that spanned more than four decades, Mike Rose frequently critiqued existing conceptions of remediation. Rather than calling for its elimination, the author argues Rose challenged teacher-scholars to reimagine our work to provide support for students whose academic experiences prior to college did not put them on equal footing with their peers.

Any WPA who specializes in or oversees courses that carry a designation of “remedial” has likely spent a fair amount of time defending the work of basic writing courses to institutional stakeholders who are far-removed from the day-to-day classroom experience of many basic writing instructors. Today, remedial courses are increasingly targeted for elimination, blamed for slowing progress toward degrees, reinforcing institutional racism, and discouraging students who might be better placed in a traditional credit-bearing FYC course. While all of this can be (and is often) true, a look back at Rose’s work on remediation provides another view, one that reminds us all that for some students, remedial courses in reading and writing offer a necessary—and, indeed, sometimes the only—pathway to accessing higher education.

To help explain to faculty and administrators beyond the writing program the level of instruction that students enrolled in remedial courses might actually need, I find myself turning often to Rose’s “Time to Help College Professors Be Better Teachers,” published about a decade ago in *The Christian Science Monitor*. In this brief article, Rose argues that more than anything, what colleges need to support nontraditional students or students who might carry the institutional label of academically “at-risk” is a renewed emphasis on *teaching*. In this brief article, Rose provides the guidance that I could have used myself when I was a new instructor. He opens with a simple example of a classroom activity:

Right after I gave my opening lecture on Oedipus the King to the 30 employees of Los Angeles’s criminal justice system, I handed out a few pages of notes I would have taken if I were sitting in their seats listening to the likes of me...we spent the last half hour of the class comparing my notes with the ones they had just taken, talking about

the way I signaled that something was important, how they could separate out a big idea from specific facts, how to ask a question without looking like a dummy. (Rose)

Those few sentences elegantly capture so many facets of basic writing instruction: the need for explicit *teaching* through modeling, the benefits of metacognition from the comparison between a model and student's own work, the importance of teaching students how to recognize the subtle cues in a lecture that signal emphasis, and how to walk the fine line that acknowledges what students need to learn about how to succeed as learners, regardless of the topic at hand, without making them feel badly about not already knowing it. These are the elements of basic writing instruction that are too often obscured in contemporary discourse about remediation.

Rose certainly identified problems with traditional models of remediation throughout his career as he argued for a shift away from grammatically-correct prose and toward a vision for *learning* that made room for a range of linguistic backgrounds, personal experience, academic inquiry, and messy attempts at engaging complexity ("Remedial Writing Courses: A Critique and a Proposal"). While he provided necessary critiques to remediation, Rose stopped short of calling for its elimination. Instead, much of his work rested on how we could better serve students who had been underserved before college and those whose academic journeys have been disrupted by circumstances beyond their control. Mike Rose saw the writing on the wall: eliminating courses that are labeled as "remedial" does not eliminate the learning needs of students who would have enrolled in those courses. Instead, eliminating those courses and the associated professional expertise renders the needs of those students invisible within larger institutional systems.

What's unique about Mike Rose's contribution to basic writing studies is his explicit effort to explain our work to people outside of the discipline, knowing too well that these external audiences would have a hand in determining the future of remediation. In *Why School?*, another piece written for a popular audience, Rose writes, "There have to be mechanisms in an educational system as vast and complex and flawed as ours to remedy the system's failures. Rather than marginalizing remediation, colleges should invest more intellectual resources into it, making it as serious and effective as it can be" (9). Here, as in many of his other works, Rose captures the tension that teacher-scholars who work in basic writing negotiate every day: acknowledging the role of our courses in both reinforcing existing inequities in higher education and also simultaneously providing instruction for the metacognitive strategies for reading and writing that are not immediately obvious to all students.

At its core, Rose's body of work on remediation demands that his readers *see* the lived experiences of students and teachers in basic writing, reminding us all that simply turning away from this work will not create an inherently equitable environment for all students. We know that students are effective communicators in their own right, yet their college courses and professional goals may demand communication that is different from what they know. We know that students can work with complex ideas from the start of their academic journeys, yet they may struggle with comprehension and abstraction. We know that placing students in courses with a basic skills designation can serve to marginalize them, yet without those courses, students who need additional support may struggle to find it. We know that focusing on cognition can be reductive, yet students who have experienced poverty and racism are more likely to bear the effects of trauma that impact cognition and learning.

Among Mike Rose's most important legacies is his constant reminder to lean into these tensions in order to ensure that they remain visible to stakeholders within and beyond our institutions. Rose envisioned a transformative future rooted in interdisciplinary research across methodologies for courses that have historically served students that are deemed least prepared for higher education ("Remediation at the Crossroads"). For as much as Mike Rose critiqued remediation, the spotlight that he held on these courses for more than four decades reminds us that we should be focused on how to do it better rather than to simply not do it at all.

WORKS CITED

- Rose, Mike. "Remediation at the Crossroads." *Inside Higher Ed.*, 21 April 2011, <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2011/04/21/remediation-crossroads>
- . "Remedial Writing Courses: A Critique and a Proposal." *College English*, vol. 45, no. 2, National Council of Teachers of English, 1983, pp. 109–28, <https://doi.org/10.2307/377219>.
- . "Time to Help College Professors Be Better Teachers." *Christian Science Monitor*, 22Mar2013 <https://www.csmonitor.com/Commentary/Opinion/2013/0322/Time-to-help-college-professors-be-better-teachers>
- . *Why School? Reclaiming Education for All of Us*. The New Press, 2009.

Lynn Reid is assistant professor of rhetoric and composition and university director of basic writing at Fairleigh Dickinson University. She has served as the co-chair for the Council on Basic Writing, a CCCC Standing Group and is co-editing a special issue of *Journal of Basic Writing* focused on legacies of Open Admissions. Her work has appeared in *JBW*, *WPA Journal*, *Kairos*, *TESOL Journal*, and several edited collections.