

“Becoming fully and richly literate”: Teaching Antiracism to Bring More Lives from the Boundaries

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*This article examines Mike Rose’s work in *Lives on the Boundary* as a foundational exploration of classist practices in writing. Rose calls for a rich literacy as a precursor to today’s calls to expand literacy. A critical language approach helps pave a path for composition to incorporate antiracist practices*

In *Lives on the Boundary*, Mike Rose called for writing teachers, especially developmental English teachers, to not compare our work with medical diagnoses and fixes, to move away from teaching grammar and correctness through simple exercises, and to instead replace this by enriching our classrooms with the enjoyment of writing and languaging. As Rose talked about what he witnessed in developmental classes, he wrote, “It teaches them that the most important thing about writing—the very essence of writing—is grammatical correctness, not the communication of something meaningful, or the generative struggle with ideas . . . not even word play” (211). Rose called for us then to help students consider language in their “schools, jobs, and neighborhoods” (211). At the time, Rose was writing about developmental English classes and the students and curriculum most common there. His call to help students use their own everyday language really echoes the sentiment in the 1974 NCTE statement of “Student’s Rights to Their Own Language.” Rose called us again to affirm the process of students’ languaging and to think about how we communicate meaningful ideas through writing.

As a graduate student and teaching assistant from a working-class background in the early 2000s, I read *Lives on the Boundary* as part of my teacher training class, and it resonated with me. When Mike Rose passed away, I thought back to how I identified with Rose while reading this book, thinking about class and society and helping students develop a love of language. I’m a queer, disabled, working-class assistant professor of English who is the writing program administrator at an open-access, historically Black university in the midwest. In my interactions with my students who fear failure, who have been traditionally underserved, and who many would call “underprepared,” I grapple daily with thinking through how best to serve our students at an HBCU, where the majority of the students are black and from a lower socio-economic background. I believe that if we take Mike Rose’s work with developmental English a step further and consider the role

of race as well as socio-economic class in our writing classes, then we find ourselves enmeshed in the discussions of antiracist pedagogy. Composition professionals must consider our complicity in racist systems because we cannot ignore the ways in which racism and classism are enmeshed within our cultural ideologies of what constitutes "academic writing."

Rose's work calls us to think about our teaching. It begins discussions focused on our grading, and the ways in which we privilege some students through teaching a standardized English that focuses on a White Mainstream English, to the exclusion of the plurality of language, all for a monolingual focus on "correctness." Indeed, the rhetoric surrounding standardized language is a moralistic rhetoric that privileges some students while openly attacking other registers and languages. If we truly celebrate Rose's call for us to teach the richness of language, word play, and the communication of ideas above the idea of correctness, then we see that we must open our heuristics of grading and evaluation for a variety of Englishes. In Asao B. Inoue's 2019 Chair's address at CCCC, he asked us to move forward in the profession by moving past the perpetuation of White language supremacy and the teaching, assessing, giving feedback, and grading based on one, standardized English. Inoue told us that to maintain one standard of English is to "maintain White supremacy" (353). While many composition scholars, teachers, and activists embrace this call and seek to make systemic changes in order to not further the oppression of our students, many more argue that language does not define a person or a culture, or they argue that we cannot move beyond one standardized English. But as Toni Morrison explains, "It's terrible to think that a child with five different tenses comes to school to be faced with those books that are less than his own language. And then to be told things about his language, which is him, that are sometimes permanently damaging . . . This is a really cruel fallout of racism . . ." (qtd. in Lippi-Green 145). It is long overdue for us to listen to writers who call for us to open our practices and systems to translingual, plurilingual, accessible and socially just systems of teaching, evaluation, and grading in our classrooms.

Not only does stripping away someone's language perpetuate racism, but I believe that to continue to teach one monolithic English oppresses all of our students, in part because as Mike Rose was telling us in 1989, to focus on "correctness" also "fosters attitudes and beliefs about written language that, more than anything, *keep* students from becoming fully and richly literate" (211). Teaching a single standard of correctness to our students keeps them from being fully and richly literate; it further oppresses our students of color, and it perpetuates a White linguistic supremacy over other cultural linguistic practices. We must continue to work to bring in

our colleagues and students who live marginalized or on boundaries. It's time to complete a calling in on our own curriculum and practices to find a way to break down boundaries in language education.

The logical progression from Mike Rose's call to help our students become "fully and richly literate" means that composition teachers should embrace teaching critical language awareness (CLA) in our writing classes. Sanchez and Paulson claim a better approach than remedial/basic skills is "one in which students learn not only how to read and write academic texts, but also how to examine critically the discourse that makes up their world(s)" (165). This is the same argument Rose makes about teaching students to think about language contexts and to think about what it might mean to change writing within a society with systemic racism and classism. Alim says the goal of CLA approaches is for "students [to] become conscious of their communicative behavior and the ways by which they can transform the conditions under which they live" (28). In order to change the racist, anti-black systems in education, we must begin to change the ways in which we teach about language and writing in our composition classes and our teacher education classes. We need to create the kind of Critical Race English Education (CREE) that Lamar L. Johnson began calling for in 2018, and we need to live up to the revolutionary hope for changing our educational systems in "This Ain't Another Statement! This is a DEMAND for Black Linguistic Justice!" from July of 2022. If we want to move forward, we must embrace teaching critical language awareness and open our practices to create fully and richly literate classrooms that invite all students to use their linguistic currency in our curriculums and to honor the tender that has been bought with so much cultural devastation and prejudice. I'm not going to pretend to know all the answers to begin this change, but I feel we move the work of Mike Rose forward by focusing on fully literate communities, when we open our classrooms up for students to use their own languages and change our teaching to begin to explore the rich literacies around us and interrogate the racist and unjust systems we perpetuate in our classes.

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