

Listening to Mike Rose: Education Is a Grand Human Enterprise

Shane A. Wood

Mike Rose dedicated his life to teaching and writing about education. He influenced teachers and students across the nation, and the author was fortunate to get to know him over the last two years. What stood out in their conversations were Rose's curiosity and commitment to exploring human nature.

This is a vignette, a short story of when I got the chance to *listen* to Mike Rose. There are a lot of people who were closer to Mike, who knew him for a longer period of time, who had deeper relationships, better friendships, and a greater understanding of who he was than me. There are a lot of folks who had him as a teacher, friend, mentor, confidant, who knew him intimately, got to learn from him, and got to experience his compassion at greater depths. And there's a lot of us who read his books and personal blog posts and words in *The Washington Post*, or heard his talks, lectures, presentations, and were charmed by his charisma and enthusiasm for teaching.

My story starts on April 18, 2019, when I emailed Mike to ask if he'd be interested in being on a podcast about teachers talking writing called *Pedagogue*.

Mike Rose—a superstar in education.

My email—a cold call.

I didn't know, at least in that moment, that Mike's generosity exceeded his well-known academic career and status. He responded within 24 hours: "I would be honored."

Over the next two years (2019-2021) Mike and I talked quite a bit. Sometimes we chatted about teaching, sometimes about writing, and sometimes about life. I still laugh when he called on a Saturday morning in September while I was mowing the backyard to ask who he could send copies of *Back to School* to and in return, said he'd mail me a bottle of Johnnie Walker Blue.

Mike Rose was truly one of a kind. You could hear gratitude in his voice. He spoke with tenderness. He carried a spirit of curiosity and compassion. His generosity was boundless. Most of the time I felt like he didn't even know the extent of his impact on teachers, students, colleagues. I never really understood that part of Mike.

In fall 2019, he emailed me again because he wanted to do a short episode that extended his thoughts in *Back to School* on "second-chancers" and

“nontraditional” college students. He was hoping to “capture the texture of people’s lives...that we rarely see represented in policy or news reports.” From my point-of-view, in those short two years, Mike was committed to peeling back the layers of education and humanity. He saw education and humanity as intertwined, and he was going to unknot it like yarn.

And in our conversations, he would start with humanity. He would rather tell stories about teachers and mentors, like Jack MacFarland, Ben Campos, and Rosalie Naumann, to name a few. He’d rather talk about how they encouraged and inspired him. He’d rather talk about Rose Meraglio Rose (Rosie), his mom who quit school in 7th grade to care for her family. He’d rather talk about her intellectual curiosity as a career waitress and her interactions with customers. So much so that he wrote about it in the first chapter of *The Mind at Work: Valuing the Intelligence of the American Worker*. Last but not least, he’d rather tell story after story about his students in elementary school, adult education courses, tutoring centers and mentoring programs, and colleges and universities, and talk about their lives and how special it was to teach.

Mike shared his first teaching experience with me on our first phone call. At 24 years old he joined a program called the Teacher Corps. He was placed in El Monte, California, and he spent all summer with a team of people getting to know the community: “I mean we met everybody. We met the priest, we met the mechanic, we met parents, we met kids, we met teachers” (*Pedagogue*, Episode 1). After spending the summer in the El Monte community, he walked into the classroom as a teacher for the first-time teaching 6th graders, mostly working-class White and Latino students. He said he was nervous, “I was green. I was young. I didn’t know what the hell I was doing, and was excited to see what would happen” (*Pedagogue*, Episode 1).

Mike started teaching with the same timidity I imagine the rest of us felt our first-time in the classroom. Maybe that’s why he never felt out-of-touch even with all his achievements and successes. It felt like Mike always remembered where he came from and how he ended up in the classroom. He was reflective and spoke so highly of his own teachers and mentors. Which was relatable. He believed teaching was a gift. Which was inspirational. In December 2020, Mike emailed me, “Thank God for the writing and students.” That’s Mike. Grateful, and with his mind on students. Kevin Dettmar, American cultural critic and writer for *The New Yorker*, put it this way, “[Mike] modelled a deep compassion that asked teachers to understand students as whole people” (“The Teacher Who Changed How We Teach Writing”).

Seeing and understanding students as “whole people” felt like Mike’s *modus operandi*. He loved talking about the purpose of education and how when you teach you learn more about what it means to be human. He told me, “There’s something profoundly special it seems to me about having the good fortune to teach because you really are participating with other people in their development” (*Pedagogue*, Episode 1). He understood how *listening* was essential to teaching: “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?” (*Pedagogue*, Episode 1).

Mike also modeled what it meant to be a great listener. He encouraged us to pursue a fuller definition of education as its connected to human nature, and this starts by listening. His writings demonstrate this commitment to exploring the human condition, specifically issues of social class, race, language, and economics. *Lives on the Boundary*, perhaps his most well-known book, interconnected these issues and represented his own educational journey. It also showed the profound impact dedicated teachers can make on the lives of students. What stands out about *Lives of the Boundary*, and other books like *Back to School* and *Possible Lives*, is that education can’t be separated from intellectual, social, civic, moral, and aesthetic realities.

In other words, Mike taught me a lot about education and humanity. That classrooms are never *just* classrooms. Students are never *just* students. Teachers are never *just* teachers. He gave me a greater perspective on identity and on politics, and how reading and writing are nuanced activities. He reminded me about the structures working within and beyond our lives shaping what we see and do as administrators, teachers, and students. He helped magnify our realities and revealed what it meant to be on the margins, working-class, overlooked, underprepared, historically disadvantaged.

He writes about this in *Back to School*, where he describes spending years interviewing students at a two-year college. He explores how “non-traditional” students balance education, social and political realities, and economic challenges. There’s a moment when a student named Ray asks Mike what he’s doing there in that classroom, in that specific context. Mike replies, “To study programs like this one because we need to know more about them to convince our politicians that we need more of them” (116). Ray responds, “It’s the teacher that really makes a difference . . . he treats us like we’re people” (116). I think about this brief exchange between Mike and Ray a lot, and ponder what it means for us in education, whether that be as writing program administrators or teachers. I think Mike reminds us that what we see “depends on where you sit, and for how long” (115). Wherever we are, and whatever we’re doing, we can’t lose sight of the *humanness*

of our work—that’s a lesson Mike reminded me time and time again in our conversations.

On January 19, 2021, we talked for the last time. I was finishing a book called *Teachers Talking Writing* that was connected to *Pedagogue* and the wonderful conversations I had with teachers and scholars on the podcast. Mike was in the first chapter, of course, and I asked for a bio. His last lines read,

I have been in education for the long haul, and it has given my life great meaning . . . education is a grand human enterprise, on a par with medicine or theology in the insight it gives us into the human condition, our struggles and our achievements. I feel so, so lucky to have found this work.

I think it’s safe to say that Mike spent his life sitting, listening, and learning from students. He examined the small particles of life—all the material, mental, emotional, political, social, and physical realities. Which is why Mike would probably ask us to consider how we are making a difference with our stories and with our voices. He would probably encourage us to think about who we are writing to/for and would gently remind us “to see ourselves not only as teachers . . . but also as writers or communicators or rhetoricians” (*Pedagogue Bonus*).

Education is a grand human enterprise. So, how are we humanizing what we do? How are we communicating the grand human enterprise of education? Our future work should start with these questions, and we should spend more time sitting and listening. And of course, we should use these experiences sitting and listening to shape larger conversations about reading, writing, literacy, teaching, students, and education.

Just like Mike.

WORKS CITED

- Dettmar, Kevin. “The Teacher Who Changed How We Teach Writing.” *The New Yorker*. October 14, 2021.
- Pedagogue*. “Episode 1: Mike Rose (pt. 1).” Podcast: Published May 9, 2021.
- Pedagogue*. “Pedagogue Bonus: Who Says What (And What Gets Told) About Higher Education? (w/Mike Rose).” Podcast. Published December 29, 2019.
- Rose, Mike. *Lives on the Boundary: A Moving Account of the Struggles and Achievements of America’s Educationally Underprepared*. Free Press, 1989.
- . *Possible Lives: The Promise of Public Education in America*. Houghton Mifflin Company, 1995.
- . *The Mind at Work: Valuing the Intelligence of the American Worker*. Viking Penguin, 2004.

—. *Back to School: Why Everyone Deserves a Second Chance at Education*. The New Press, 2012.

Shane A. Wood is assistant professor of English at the University of Southern Mississippi, where he teaches first-year writing, digital literacies, and technical writing. He received his BA in English from Western Kentucky University, MA in English from Fresno State, and PhD in rhetoric and composition from the University of Kansas. His research interests include writing assessment, teacher response, and multimodal pedagogy. His work has appeared in journals such as *The Journal of Writing Assessment*, *WPA: Writing Program Administration*, and *Computers and Composition*.

