

## In Memory of Mike Rose

Ellen Cushman

*This essay recognizes the enduring impact of Mike Rose on the field of writing and literacy studies, the quality of his mind, and his dedication to education, teaching, and learning.*

Mike Rose knew no strangers. He was earnest, engaging, generous, and measured with his words. He encouraged, nudged, pushed, corrected, challenged, and questioned, and always with effortless charm and warm directness. Mike Rose was a scholar's scholar of teaching, learning, literacy, and education. At the core of his being, he held a bountiful vision of the democratic potential of public education and the everyday intelligence of students and workers. He held steady to the belief that the greatest potential of democracy was realized in a teacher's respectful challenge, a student's puzzling over a tough question, and a worker's clarity of purpose in efficient movements. He questioned the too-easy reduction, the minimization of complexity, and the simplistic platitudes that lend to impoverished portrayals of learners and workers, teachers and writing programs, poverty and immigration. His voice, deep and thoughtful, added to public conversations a steady measure of wisdom about the importance of education. Although his presence is and will be keenly missed, we have his enduring legacy of writing from which to draw courage, insight, and cautious hope.

Driven by his moral and ethical commitment to the issues that gnawed at him—injustice, bias, misrepresentation, or simplification—Mike doggedly pursued the everyday detail of intellectual work to represent the richness and difficulty of literacy learning, classroom interactions, and the intelligence of blue-collar and service work. He detailed the achievement and abilities of students, the painstaking work of teachers, and the lives and desires of immigrants. Mike lamented the slide of public discourse in America that too often placed the onus to change squarely on the shoulders of those least of all in the position to bear that onus. He would cuss with Italian gusto, then sharpen his pencil and write. Injustice angered him and fueled his writing. He corrected the public record, especially on the topics of school reform, student intelligence, the importance of writing programs, and the state of public education. He held the highest value for thoughtful and well-informed public discourse about blue-collar workers, teachers, writers, and learners most at risk of exclusion. He skillfully invited all of us to rethink learning in the context of abject poverty, overt and insidious

racism, and lack of access to opportunity. He safeguarded these moral and ethical commitments in his research, opinion pieces, and blog postings. The strength we hear in his voice across these genres shall continue to inspire us as we endeavor to realize the most generous measure of democratic possibilities in education, teaching, and learning.

A prosaic aesthetic stirred Mike to represent the richness and complexity of learning, teaching, and working across the many genres of writing he took up. Mike loved a good turn of phrase. After a deep conversation with a teacher or student at a conference, he routinely pulled out a short pencil and pocket notebook from his well-worn jeans to jot a note about a phrase, who said it, and in what context. Sometimes he would read it aloud with an appreciative “humph,” or a “that’s nice isn’t it?” or a “isn’t that a hoot?” He leaned into conversations, especially over a beer, listened with a hand on his chin, deep eye contact, and earnest gut-core reactions—“huhn,” “hmmm,” or clicking his tongue as he carefully chose words for his gracious response. When he heard something that moved him, especially from colleagues at conferences who had waited in queues to meet him after a speech, he would lean in, close his eyes to focus on their words, and always have his fullest attention trained on the person in front of him. When conference attendees spoke of what moved them to learn, when and how they started, what they bring to the work they’re doing and why, he listened hard. The details of every person’s learning and teaching experience were equally worth his time and focused attention. The notes he took, the scholars he talked to and read, the opinion pieces and essays he enjoyed, and the people, above all the people, ignited the “craft pleasure” he took in his writing. Craft pleasure, “getting the sentences right, telling a good story” impelled Mike to render “experience in a way that readers can participate in imaginatively” (“Writing Our Way”).

Mike strove to represent the challenge of learning. In the opening pages of *Lives on the Boundary*, Mike tells stories of learning, belonging, and mismatched expectations and skills. Bobby sat in an American Social History course Mike had helped to develop for underprepared students.

He was watching the professor intently. His notebook was open in front of him. His pen was poised. But he wasn’t writing. Nothing. I’d look back during the hour: still attentive but still no notes . . . So I sit under the jacarandas with Bobby. His girlfriend joins us. She is having a tough time, too. Both have been at UCLA for about three months now, and they are now in the fourth week of fall term. Bobby is talking animatedly about his linguistics course. It was all diagrams and mathematics and glottal stops. It was not what he expected

from a course about the study of language. “They’re asking me to do things I don’t know how to do. All the time. Sometimes I sit in the library and wonder if I’m gonna make it” (*Lives* 4).

Bobby wasn’t alone. The jacarandas, glottal stops, poised pen, and blank notebook sheets of Bobby’s story remind us how easy it is “to forget what a strange place” academe is (5).

His prosaic aesthetic fit hand in glove with his methodological rigor. He infused public discourse with the rich vocabulary needed to do justice to the intellectual intricacy of learning, teaching, and working. Ray Rosas’s and Christina Saidy’s essays in this issue make this point well. Stories were in the heart of Mike’s research, especially his own stories of growing up as the son of working-class Italian Immigrants raised in soul-grinding poverty. The living memory of Tommy and Rosie Rose, Mike’s parents, was everywhere present in his work. Many of his books are dedicated to his parents. Their lives and work stoked the tender embers of his storytelling, forming his earliest memories of precarity and dreams of a better life. Their lives inspired his own lifelong pursuit of literacy and learning development and his deep desire to portray the intelligence of workers, teachers, and learners. Rosie Rose waitressed. Interviews with her are at the heart of *The Mind at Work*. When she passed away, the words didn’t come easily for Mike. “The sentences I formed in my head felt artificial, forced, as though whatever I wrote had to be weighty. If nothing else, it was awkward trying to keep the notebook open, standing in front of her grave, attempting to write something . . . lofty. Talking with Rosie could be funny, exasperating, heartrending, and you’d be taken with her wily gumption. But lofty? She’d think you were a bullshitter.” From Rosie Rose’s stories, his passion for dignifying the intellect of work took hold. From her skillful problem solving, he would hypothesize the myriad choices blue-collar workers make within the smallest of gestures. From Tommy and Rosie Rose, the sharing of their lives and later the memory of their lives, Mike would gather light, purpose, and an intensity of focus—the heart and mind of so much of his work.

The gross meanness and the paucity of nuance in public discourse about educating poor and working-class people really bothered him. His own teaching in low-income communities and research in schools at the boundaries of society’s wealth demonstrated for him, time and again, the cognitive dimensions of teaching, learning, and working. And he used that understanding to counter simplistic abstractions that belittle poor people as underserving, or “sponging off the system,” or a problem. Reductive descriptions of poor people and immigrants fail to accurately portray the living, breathing people that Mike taught and knew well. So he marshaled vignette, case study, and interview to describe literacy development learning

and problem solving in loving detail with delicacy, spot-on accuracy, and unflinching honesty. Mike was sober about the significant challenges faced by people who are at the bottom of the income ladder. But he was, at the end of the day, also hopeful. Though Mike was “critical of standard practice and the social order” he reminds us in the introduction to *An Open Language*: “it is hope that drives [his] writing, hope that careful analysis and the right phrasing might in some small, small way open a space to think anew” (1). And that hope came from the very people of his writing.

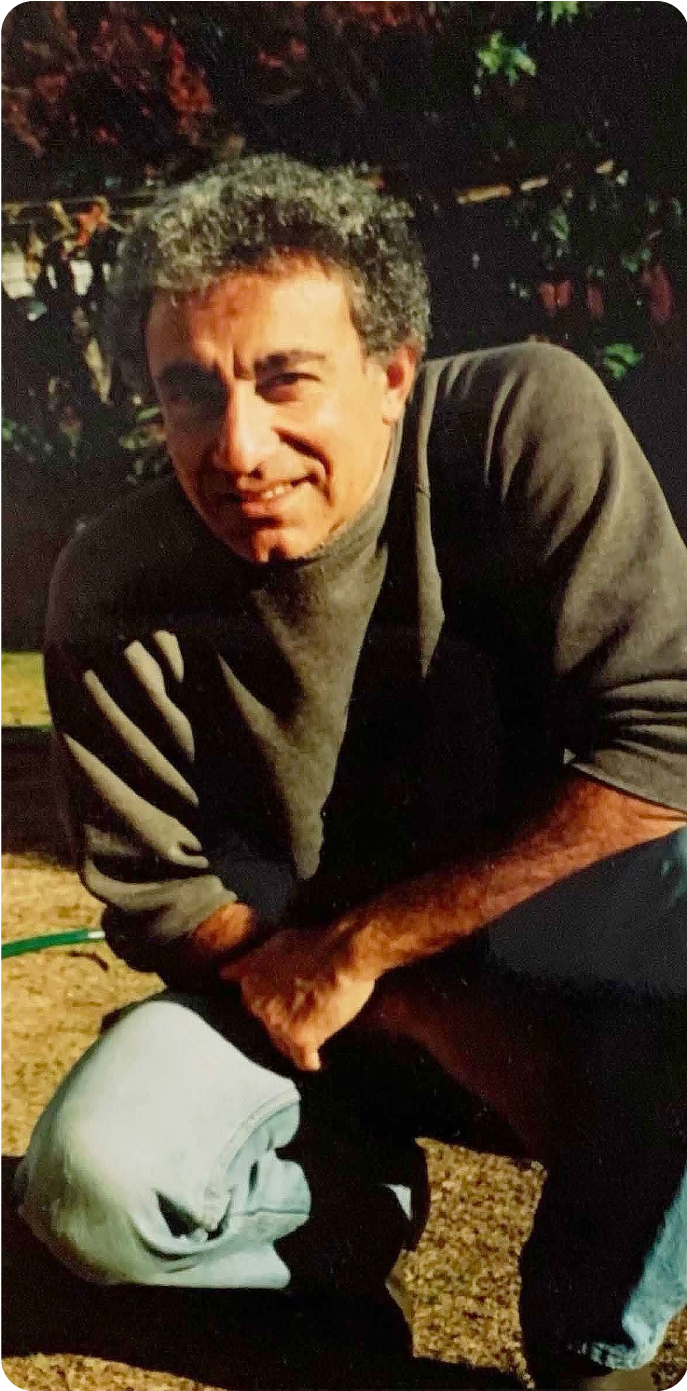
Mike’s methodological chops served him well to keep in check those outsized claims widespread in the media that diminish the lights of working poor, adult learners, young students, and teachers in underserved neighborhoods and community colleges. He gathered the concrete details of their day-to-day decisions to lend dimension to their lives, to show the complexity of the intellectual, social, and psychological terrains they navigated daily, to surface their values and hopes, and to make visible the hard choices and grinding challenges they faced just to make ends meet. He told stories to help policymakers, educators and future researchers better understand precisely for whom their work has implications. He understood that stories enact a social contract and animate civic life. And his stories were ever-so-close to the experiences, the lived realities, the messiness of intellectual work—there was no daylight between claims and evidence in his stories.

Learning and using methodologies for Mike served another purpose: methodologies are road maps into the intellectual workings of disciplines. As he grappled with a methodology, so too did he grapple with the restlessness and discomfort he had with professional confines. He opened up the inner workings of disciplines by studying their methods, and in doing so, he enabled himself and his students to achieve, to convey richer stories and understandings, and to have impact beyond disciplines themselves. Mike was sick of academic snobbery that demeaned applied work, especially the work of writing teachers, and that maintained rigid structures of access to knowledge, activity, and learning opportunities. “Intelligence doesn’t reside inert in a discipline or kind of work or in one segment of a system rather than another; intelligence emerges in activity and in context” (“The College Cheating Scandal”). Mike was so dedicated to this unveiling the process of knowledge making and especially how it helped underprepared students and scholars to access disciplinary knowledge, he and Malcolm Kiniry co-edited a text and reader on the topic of academic strategies.

Mike loved teaching and learning and everything it revealed about students’ intelligence. Mike Rose and Glynda Hull were among the first to challenge deficit-oriented assumptions about the linguistic and cognitive abilities of students, particularly for students labeled as “remedial,” a

programmatic label that codes for poor, black, brown, and/or immigrant students, and that masks in technocratic language systemic legacies of inequity and inequality. In reflecting on the Braddock Award Winning essay, “This Wooden Shack Place,” which he and Glynda Hull co-authored, Mike explains that their intention was to “get in close to a moment of pedagogical interaction, to dwell on it in hopes of understanding its complexity and drawing something instructive from it” (*An Open Language* 239). This dwelling in and on pedagogical interactions between writing teachers and students points to another facet of the methodological rigor he and Glynda Hull practiced: it allowed the instructional discourse of teaching, learning, and writing to surprise, to spur the invention of meaning and knowledge. Dwelling in Robert’s unconventional reading of the poem, “And Your Soul Shall Dance for Wakako Yamauchi” by Garrett Kaoru Hongo, they discovered a logic and coherence in his interpretation. They go on to propose an alternative to the template of participation patterns of classroom discourse (Initiation-Comment-Response). The transactive instructional method they propose places knowledge making at the center of classroom discourse: “the real stuff of belonging to an academic community is dynamic involvement in generating and questioning knowledge” (249). With Glynda Hull, Mike Rose helped to move the field of writing and writing program administration into asset-based pedagogies in 1990.

Mike had a great sense of humor, laughed deeply, and appreciated puns. The sonorous vibrato of his laughter could quiet a room. He could never remember the setup to a joke, but loved to repeat punch lines: “Wrecked him? Hell, it nearly killed him;” “Super calloused fragile mystic;” “Shirley, you jest.” He appreciated the ironic, wry, and sarcastic comment, but remained wary of the sour nihilism born from the fruits of disinterested critique. “I suppose it is a good thing when even Ted Cruz is talking about economic inequality” (“A Reprise of Rags to Riches”). After he retired from teaching, he still researched and blogged and opined with that same hard-won balance of effective narrative and inviting prose. And he encouraged students, teachers, administrators, and scholars to do the same—to always think about our writing and research and leadership as connecting to issues of societal importance. He was compelled to critique, yes, but then to model and recommend and advise with emphasis on the cognitive foundations of writers, learners, teachers, and blue-collar workers. His wry comments were tempered with precision and the serious call to think and do better.



Mike Rose, circa 1991. Courtesy of Ellen Cushman, from Mike Rose.

For teachers of writing and writing program administrators, Mike's legacy of writing continues to inspire and be timely—there's something refreshing in returning to his work. And the essays in this special issue help to make clear why that's so. *Possible Lives* brings us into classrooms around the country, from the border city of Calexico, to Polaris and Missoula, Montana, to Tucson, Baltimore, and New York to see the democratic possibility of education. With his signature eye for detail, he revealed the professional perceptiveness of teachers like Stephanie Terry, Yvonne Divans Hutchinson, and Elena Castro who knew how to open up learning and language and science for their students and how to draw into their classrooms the people and communities where they taught. *Back to School* is especially inspiring for community college professors. Jensen and Hogue, Turner Ledgerwood, and Reid offer their insights into why this is so in this issue. *Why School? Reclaiming Education for All of Us* is a smartly powerful read for the bone-weary writing teacher and program administrator (see Newkirk, Moore, and Ritter's essays in this issue who also speak to the ways Mike's writing inspired them). To those new to research on writing, *An Open Language: Selected Writing on Literacy, Learning, and Opportunity*, offers important models for scholarship and public writing. The detailed ways in which evidence is brought to bear in those writings to make nuanced and impactful points are especially important. Mike's attention to details, gestures, observations, and explicit instruction, particularly as these lend themselves to interventions in public discourse, are remembered well in the appreciations offered by John Paul Tassoni, Margorie Stewart, and Ryan Skinnell, also in this issue.

Some days we may need to be reminded of the ways in which the work we do nourishes the deep systemic roots of democracy's possibilities and helps to redress its injustices. Mike's work will continue to nudge us away from the abyss of despair that yawns open just to the right or left of the good paths we're on as teachers of writing and administrators. And he knew this good path from the inside out, charting his own unconventional way from writing teacher to tenured full professor at UCLA. Eschewing his hard-won professional success, Mike always introduced himself as a teacher. He steadfastly honored the calling of teaching because teaching afforded him a dynamic way of knowing and being. Shane Wood makes this point beautifully in this special issue. Mike humanized the grand social contract of education in all he said, wrote, did, and spoke.

Mike championed the everyday intellect present in manual labor, teaching, and learning. He animated his portraits of teachers, learners, and workers with details that were painstakingly rendered through the eye of a scientist, the ear of a poet, and the heart of a humanist. He made everyone feel

important and heard, even when he disagreed with them. Honest to Pete: Mike Rose was one the best. A kind man, a keen scholar, a model teacher, and a dear friend.

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