

Lives in the Complexity

Douglas Hesse

Mike Rose's early teaching and writing administration, reflected in conversations and documents from the late 1970's to early 1990s, use pragmatic cognitivist frameworks to further progressive goals. While he modified and recontextualized this framework as he became an elder statesman and public intellectual, he maintained these views. The author asserts, from Rose's life and career, contemporary WPAs might take three lessons: Write regularly, including for personal interests, not only disciplinary fealty; Value identities as teachers and writers as equal to administrative advancement; Practice passions kindly.

“OKAY, BUT CAN HE WRITE?”¹

I first met Mike Rose in March 1994, when he gave a talk at Illinois State, where I was directing the writing program. We were using his textbook with Malcolm Kiniry, *Critical Strategies for Academic Thinking and Writing*, and Bedford/St. Martin's agreed to send him to Normal. We were happy enough to hear about pedagogy but more interested in meeting the author of *Lives on the Boundary* and essays like “Rigid Rules, Inflexible Plans, and the Stifling of Language” that were mainstays of the TA teaching seminar.

I have just a couple impressions from that distant encounter. Neither involves remarks on the textbook, which are lost to me. Instead, I remember Mike's interest in my own working-class past, the first-gone-to-college son of a garbage truck driver and a homemaker. That connection, fueled by his basic kindness, kept us in touch over the years. Mind you, we were hardly close friends, and no doubt hundreds of others enjoyed what I did: Mike chatting when we crossed paths, asking about family, sharing recent experiences and ideas. Occasionally, I'd get a note, often tied to new publications, but the promotional part of such messages was apologetic. The other impression—and I'm hesitant to share it, doing so only because later I joked about it with Mike himself—was that a few students and colleagues told me how good looking they found him. Thirty-something me didn't know what to do with such comments. Sixty-something me looks back through foggy lenses and smiles.

By the time we met, Mike was balancing identities from two different but related sources: a cognitivist paradigm grounded in psychology and a genre paradigm grounded in discourse theory. I recognized the first, represented by *Writer's Block: The Cognitive Dimension*, as important but, I'll

confess, not personally interesting. My failure. I found the second keenly interesting. This work, which recognized discursive differences among academic disciplines and intellectual operations they shared, appealed because it solved curricular and pedagogical problems for those of us then directing large writing programs.

What I wasn't fully recognizing in 1994 was what would become Rose's most important identity: as narrative chronicler of literate lives of individuals who didn't track the "traditional" (aka white middle-class) mainstream. Yes, there was the groundbreaking *Lives on the Boundary*. But as strange as it might now seem today, thirty years ago it seemed something of a fortunate aberration. When Annie Dillard published her shimmering essay collection *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, she included an "Author's Note" that explained in part, "At any rate, this is not a collection of occasional pieces, such as a writer brings out to supplement his real work; instead this is my real work, such as it is" (vi). *Lives* was Mike's real work. Or at least part of it.

He cheerfully tried to reconcile his scholarly interests as he grew into an elder statesman. His 2006 collection, *An Open Language: Selected Writing on Literacy, Learning, and Opportunity*, reflects on conflicts between his cognitivist orientation and the social critiques that were impugning its assumptions. He noted that he still saw in cognition "a democratic possibility and a critical vocabulary" (13). Rose accounted for individuals operating within social formations, modifying his work as did Pat Bizzell--her own cognitive confidence in *Academic Discourse and Critical Consciousness*. He focused most consistently on class, with the *scene* of this focus, to invoke Burke's term, first the school, later the workplace. The organization of *An Open Language* is revealing in terms of the time-overlapped section headings under that organize the book's twenty-eight chapters:

The Cognition of Composing, 1980-1985

Teaching Academic Writing, 1979-2001

Integrating the Cognitive and the Social Critical Perspectives on Writing Instruction, 1985-1991

School and Society, 1989-1995

The Mind at Work: Researching the Everyday, 1999-2004

Public Writing: Style and Persuasion, 1989-2005

Re-reading the collection's preface and introductions, I appreciate Mike candidly confessing limitations, especially in method even as he defends his corpus, and arguing its coherence. I've done probably 75-80 external reviews for tenure and promotion, and I always pause at the direction,

inevitably from research universities, to assess both the prominence and coherence of research agendas. In part, this manifests the anxious defense of disciplinarity, which wants systematic methods applied to bounded questions. The threatening counter-practice is journalism, professors exploring opportunistic subjects through narrative approaches for audiences that may, heaven forbid, include general readers. Mike increasingly turned that direction, doubling down on the approach of *Lives on the Boundary* or *The Mind at Work*. While I don't think it crucial to define Mike Rose's research agenda, if pressed, I'd point to the urgent, eloquent desire to understand literate practice in all its individual complexities, providing practical approaches to penetrate barriers and misperceptions.

Mike's public turn brought deserved attention and respect both within our field and beyond, ultimately generating recognition such as *The New Yorker's* posthumous appreciation (Dettmar). We surely might heed his call "to bring research and practice into the public sphere, both to test and refine them and to seek broader influence" ("An Open" 9). I think our profession has gotten a little better in the dozen years since he wrote, but his observation still holds:

We academics easily develop a tin ear to the sound of our own language. We talk too much to each other, and not beyond. We risk linguistic, intellectual, and political isolation. Many good things have come of rhetoric and compositions move toward disciplinary status. But with disciplinarity also comes a turn inward, a concentration on the mechanics of the profession, on internal debates and intellectual display. . . . ("Writing" 291)

While it might seem regressive, I want to explore the early research that brought him to Normal, scholarship grounded in both practical and intellectual interests. Early on, Mike (like many of us), had administrative responsibilities as part of the formidable group at UCLA in the late seventies/early eighties, which included Carol Hartzog as Director of Writing Programs and Richard Lanham as Executive Director. By the mid 1980s, he was Director of the UCLA first-year program, and his 1984 "Descriptive Report" is instructive. Take the report's first curricular principle: "Writing must be taught as a vital process that aids the storing, structuring, discovering, and re-visioning of information for self and others, a process central to our attempts to make sense of the world" (11). There's a striking emphasis on information over rhetoric, on writing as an epistemic act. Or take the second principle: "University students must learn to write the kind of discourse that is central to academic inquiry" (11) and the related

third: “When possible, writing assignments should be built on the kinds of materials students encounter at the university” (12). The document conservatively positions the first-year course as academic discourse as opposed, say, to civic or vocational.

Rose’s role required shepherding a *teachable* curriculum for TA’s. It had to have a discernible logic and direction, assignments and methods both meaningful and doable. Simultaneously, the curriculum had to assuage a wider university community that expected value in a required *writing* course. Certainly, communal expectations could be misguided, and Rose and colleagues pushed back against servile “correctness,” for example. The UCLA curricular principles were ambitious, absolutely, but they kept steadily to developing skills *in* writing rather than, say, inculcating ideas *about* writing, or about wider issues and problems. There were six course options.

- “A Course in Autobiography—From Personal to Academic Writing” was informed by the Bartholomae/Petrosky *Ways of Knowing* sequence to move students from writing autobiographies, to analyzing classmates’ writings, to abstracting larger principles (22).
- “The Freshman Preparatory Program Curriculum” applied specific cognitive strategies to materials and problems from different disciplines (23).
- “The Project Workshop” functioned as a lab/seminar where students complete three or four projects requiring extensive research, choosing from instructor-provided lists (26).
- “The Cross-Disciplinary Theme-Centered Course” had students write from texts on a central theme treated in multiple disciplines (Rose uses the example of “Insiders and Outsiders,” with texts from literature, sociology, and biology). The theme is meant to be a vehicle for developing strategies for academic writing, not a destination (24).
- “Cross-Cultural Readings Curriculum” courses used “fiction from Central and Latin America, Asia, and Africa” alongside readings from “political science, anthropology, history, sociology, and psychology.” Rose explicitly asserted “this is not a literature course, but rather a writing course that builds assignments from literary and social science texts” (25).
- “Introduction to Academic Reading Writing: The History of Ideas Format.” This emphasis, designed for developing students, was “built on key issues or figures in Western intellectual history” from religion, philosophy, science, politics, and art (25).

Rose's sixty-page report includes sample syllabi and other materials (for example, a two-hour placement test that has students read a passage from Studs Terkel's *Working* and write from one of three prompts). Looking at the document through the eyes of a longtime WPA, I'm struck by two things. I recognize, first, a certain element of appeasement, a desire to accommodate different teaching interests within the program—and different interests/pressures beyond it. But, second, Rose and his colleagues sought to provide a map and legend through higher ed's strange landscape by focusing on finite strategies. Which?

One of Rose's earliest publications was "Teaching University Discourse: A Theoretical Framework and a Curriculum," presented at a meeting of the Canadian Council of Teachers of English. The paper explains that "the freshman composition course must bridge faculty expectations and student skill" through five components of exposition: seriation, classification, synthesis, compare/contrast, and analysis.

Those strategies later transmuted into defining, summarizing, serializing, classifying, comparing, and analyzing. This might seem like the stuff of current-traditional rhetoric. It's not. Rather than providing models for mimicry, *Critical Strategies* poses analytic questions and structured processes, with informal writing-to-learn activities along the way. There's extensive how-to advice and plenty of cases from different disciplines. The chapter on definition, for example, includes issues from political science and psychology, among others, and has writing options from biology, genetics, history, philosophy, and others. Unlike WID efforts that would have students emulate specific disciplinary discourse conventions (although Appendix 2 does scaffold "Exploring the Discourse of Your Major") and unlike thematic foci whose content ever threaten to sideline writing itself, Kiniry and Rose try building writerly synapses through cognitive operations.

With a disciplinary dissecting microscope of twenty-five years, I could readily call out reductive assumptions in the long-ago UCLA program. I could question whether academic discourse (not civic or cultural) is the best focus for required writing. I suspect Mike could, too. But what impresses me still is how these courses are *in* writing, not *about* it—or about any host of extra-writing agendas. At a time when [outlandish claim alert] we organize so much writing instruction to indulge our own theories of language, identity, and authority, at a time when decades of research and theory have rightly rendered writing and its development impossibly complex, WPAs might take a lesson from Mike. We might see students as individuals differently inhabiting the world, not as representatives of categories or classifications.

WPAs might take three more lessons.

1. Write. “But,” we might protest, “we do!” Certainly, we produce the multiple kinds of instrumental writing needed to do our jobs, much of it evanescent and obliged. We do scholarship beyond instructions and reports, reviews and policies—all kinds of activities Mike would perhaps regard as connecting us with the workers he championed. But Mike enacted other kinds of writing, much of it closer to journalism than ethnography, welling from observation and conversation, for readers who want to read as well as those simply obliged, in genres where narrative and scene matter as much as analysis. Such writing might advance our professional cause publicly, yes, but it might as importantly make ourselves more fully Our Selves, with what and how we write shaped by personal interests rather than dictated by disciplinary fealty. Read his poem about Richard Brautigan (“He Used”). Perhaps to do this writing we might do less of others.

2. Value our identity as teachers and writers. While some of us fall into WPA work by circumstance, others increasingly pursue it by design. (See endnote 2.) That’s fine, of course, and no doubt being WPA brings rewards intellectual and financial. But being a WPA can become a dazzling, consumptive identity. More power to those who relish that identity and want to climb ladders. But demurring is not failure. I simply assert the nobility of being teacher and writer, professional identities beyond “manager” that brought us to the field. I hope. At some point, Mike stopped being WPA, and his most influential work arguably happened then. I’m a fine hypocrite to say so, but it’s reasonable to leave WPA work for something that may be more rewarding and important. It was for Mike.

3. Practice passions kindly. Mike certainly aspired to ideas and experiences, partly I’m sure for ego’s reasons that impel us all. But there was also the imperative, embraced as responsibility, to improve lives of people who don’t get a fair shake. Along the way, he took time with others, especially listening to them, not just pressing his agenda. Perhaps his working-class background bred kindness as coping. Regardless of our personal pasts, we can all aspire to be counted kind.

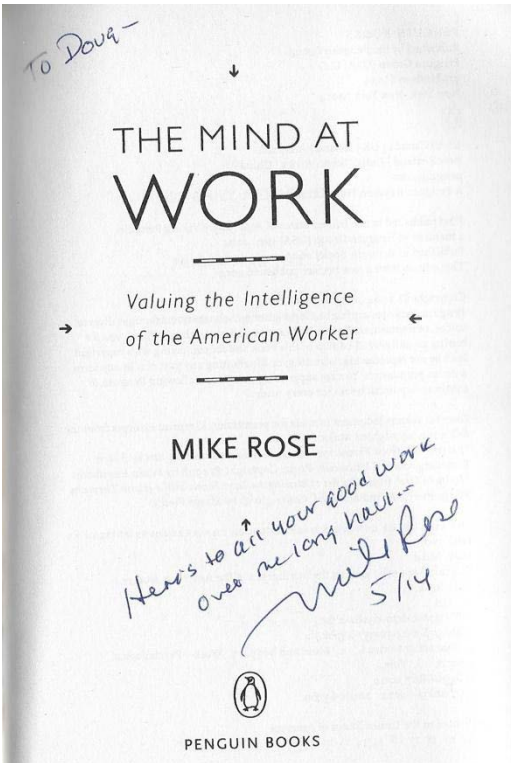


Figure 1. Inscription from Mike Rose to Doug Hesse

NOTES

1. The epigraph is a question posed by editors to Mike Rose's agent, who was trying to sell *Lives on the Boundary*. It was motivated by skepticism of professors' abilities to reach publics. ("Writing for the Public," p. 284).

2. I write about these developments in Hesse, Douglas. "Aging Through the Thirty-Year Rise of Professionalized Writing Administration." *Talking Back: Senior Scholars and Their Colleagues Deliberate the Past, Present, and Future of Writing Studies*, edited by Norbert Elliot and Alice Horning, U Colorado P, 2020, pp. 189-209.

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