

Mike Rose's Two-Year College Advocacy

Darin L. Jensen and Cheryl Hogue Smith

As community college faculty, the authors know that Mike Rose was a champion of our institutions. The dialogue here reflects both his personal influence on the authors as literacy workers and on two-year college English studies.

Darin: I was teaching in Omaha at Metro Community College in a program for high school dropouts when a colleague handed me *Lives on the Boundary*. I was struck by the first line: “This is a hopeful book about those who fail.” The book explores language in human connection, literacy, and culture and focuses on those who have trouble reading and writing in schools and in the workplace. I had found someone who directly spoke to my work. His work has shaped my entire practice as a community college teacher and literacy professional.

Cheryl: I first read this in a graduate class at Cal State Bakersfield, where I was also teaching. So I didn't first read it through a community college lens. It's interesting that you thought he was talking to you, and I thought he was talking to me.

Darin: He was talking to us.

Cheryl: Right, right.

Darin: In the first chapter of *Lives on the Boundary*, Rose turns our understanding of literacy history on its head: others use statistics to demonstrate educational decay, but Mike saw our literacy crisis through the perspective provided by another set of numbers, and he talks about how literacy rates have risen the last 60-70 years. His counterargument pushes against manufactured literacy crises that arise cyclically as well as the testing and standardization culture which have emerged from those moral panics. Mike's work demonstrates that these moments have always been more about who we're letting in and what kinds of literacy we privilege.

Cheryl: That dovetails with *Back to School*: “I want to return to those dreary statistics about student success. . . . Some of us are also concerned that these aggregate rates of completion degrees and rates of transfer don't reflect the multiple reasons why people go to community college and why they leave” (13). He describes two students who left community college—one for the Navy, “where he could continue

his education,” and one after she had earned enough credits “to get a better job in her company”—students who many would claim “would be recorded as dropouts, a failure both for them and their college” (13).

Darin: That echoes back to *Lives on the Boundary*: we keep moving the goalposts for literacy rather than having an authentic conversation about what literacy is.

Cheryl: Yes. Mike kept saying we cannot use the same evaluative processes for two- and four-year colleges because students who enter two-year colleges don't necessarily have the same goals as those who enter a four-year.

Darin: That's important. We always talk about completion rate as in “how many years.” The American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) has developed another way of quantifying success (AACC). But, Mike is talking about that at least a decade before anybody else. He saw that problem. You earlier said he was “prescient”; he saw how we were going to paint community colleges as not being successful, when what we were really looking at was a different measure of success. We seem trapped in a language of schooling that stresses economics, accountability, and compliance. Not only did Mike understand the way we're called “failures” but how the response has been to narrow everything down to these pathways that essentially say, “This is what school is; we're gonna make you a widget.”

Cheryl: His body of work speaks to what others consider failure and what they do with it. Those who have never taught at community college, and I would include in that number some administrators who work at community colleges, don't understand that students' failures aren't necessarily failures. Thus, they indiscriminately implement programs, trying to fit us all into a box of success *they* have defined. That community colleges are constantly “redesigned” by people who don't understand them is absurd. In their eyes, we're failures; in our eyes, we know we're not. Do we fail some students? Of course, but that doesn't mean we're failures.

Darin: Mike got community college in ways that other scholars, especially scholars at four-year universities, don't. Part of that is, I think, because he was a first-generation kid who grew up poor, and his mom was a waitress, and his dad was sick. He used personal experience as a lens through which to understand the human consequences of what we do as two-year college literacy workers, and it's what makes him important. Large-scale reforms from places like Lumina or the Gates Foundation apply business logics of efficiency to something that is human

and messy. Lives aren't just on the boundary; lives are also complicated. In *The Mind at Work*, Mike's showing us how to value other kinds of intelligences. Think of a tile worker who can look at a room and say, "This is how much tile we need, and this is how it should be cut." That has levels of intelligence and skill many of us don't have, yet some denigrate it.

Cheryl: He also noticed the corporatization of community colleges. Just look at the administrative bloat and how some Presidents are calling students "customers."

Darin: "Customer" comes from "custom house"; it means "to buy a credential." And that's not what "student" means. And it's a fundamental misunderstanding of what education is. More than that, it's a fundamental conflict about what education is about: admin are making it about something people can buy, and I want it to be something that people have a right to earn.

Cheryl: Right. It's a deliberate attempt to distort. It's deliberate, absolutely deliberate. Mike was always trying to temper what people were doing *to* community colleges. That's not to say we don't have room for improvement; we do, and Mike was always the first to say so.

Darin: In *Why School?* Mike says, "If we in some way constrict the full range of everyday cognition, then we will develop limited educational programs and fail to make fresh and meaningful instructional connections among disparate kinds of skills and knowledge" (96-97). That kind of functionalist narrow model takes away so much choice that it takes away from possibility.

Cheryl: With Mike gone, we collectively have to be that loud voice that explains what a community college *really is* versus what everyone else thinks it *should be*. Otherwise, we're going to become the automatons they want us to be.

Darin: Yes. It's *our* responsibility now; it's literacy workers in two-year college writing studies and writing programs that have that work in front of them. Most importantly, we must emphasize that one-size-fits-all reforms will not work.

Cheryl: Very true. Just look at, say, the "elimination" of developmental education and placement reform.

Darin: Yes, as we address the needs of two-year college literacy work, we must focus on placement. We know placement systems are embedded in local ecosystems which are inequitable. This doesn't mean that placement systems are automatically applied unfairly or are

automatically inaccurate or that they are automatically fairly applied with an understanding of the best practices of placement and with a conscious effort to address and ameliorate (elimination may not be possible) the inequities of placement.

Cheryl: And that gets to the elimination of developmental education, which isn't really an elimination as much as it is a redistribution. Unless a program is integrating reading and writing instructions in all levels of composition, students will not receive the attention to reading that they need. We're seeing it in first-year writing, where the needs of students have been blurred and the class becomes a mixture of prepared and those who need more support. First-year writing classes of today are reminiscent of dev-ed classes of yore. And it's because people who have no business making decisions are making decisions, and our classes are filled with multiple skill levels of students, which makes targeted instruction much more difficult and belies the very fabric of completion and persistence.

Darin: This work will require a deep revisioning of literacy studies as a transdisciplinary effort. Concomitant with that, we must be teacher-scholar-activists who engage in the front-facing work of advocating for our students and discipline before anyone else imagines it for us. Essentially, we are in a struggle to write the narrative of literacy studies for the 21st century two-year college. Our students' lives—and perhaps our democracy—depends upon it.

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