Mike Rose: Helping All of Us Do Better

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Mike Rose left us with many legacies, three of which I highlight here: his re-conceptualization of school as part of the public; his reflection on both the human act of teaching and the promise of teaching more humanely; and the need for teachers to share widely what we have learned from our teaching.

I didn't know Mike Rose well, but I knew his work; I think every one of my generation did. Teaching pre-service teachers, I assigned *Lives on the Boundary*. Interested in models of composing, I read his work on writing blocks and cognition. Something of a student of linguistics and aware of the role metaphors play in shaping our understandings, I appreciated his point that in borrowing medical metaphors—as when we talked about *diagnosing* student writing—we pathologized writing. Reading his classroom research, with its intense focus on classroom conversation, I found it insightful, showing us what, *in medias res*, we often cannot otherwise see. Hearing his CCCC Exemplar address's exhortation that we take our work public, I thought it brilliant. But perhaps most of all, I appreciated the way Mike always saw the human in all of us.

Mike Rose wasn't a typical WPA, of course. He directed a writing program early in his career, but left the post pretty quickly, never to return; he didn't publish in *WPA: Writing Program Administration*; he didn't serve on the Executive Board or as an officer for the Council of Writing Program Administrators. Put simply, he didn't inhabit the role of the WPA as we ordinarily construe it. And yet, his legacy, at least implicitly, raises several continuing questions for WPAs, three of which I explore here.

First: *What is the role of the public sphere in WPA work?*

Mike Rose's philosophy of education was located squarely in the public sphere, as he explained on his own blog:

> If I had to sum up the philosophical thread that runs through my work, it would be this: A deep belief in the ability of the common person, a commitment to educational, occupational, and cultural opportunity to develop that ability, and an affirmation of public institutions and the public sphere as vehicles for nurturing and expressing that ability.

Jeffersonian in spirit but situated in and informed by 20th and 21st century contexts, Mike's common person wasn't Jefferson's property-holding

white man, but rather *all* common people, kaleidoscopic in their dazzlingly diverse colors, shapes, and sizes. Mike's common person necessarily had ability, one entitled to support; after all, providing such support, nurturing ability, was the responsibility of public institutions as well as the pleasure and the opportunity of the public sphere.

Second: *How do we share our experience of teaching writing with the world?*

This question, related to but different than the first, asks us more directly to think about how we make our experience available to others in the world. As Mike's work itself illustrates, he believed in writing for various publics: the community of teachers of writing, certainly, but also—and perhaps more importantly—the larger democratic community. He made this very clear in his 2012 CCCC Exemplar Address as he bid us to share our expertise and make connections with the wider world.

> Seek the public sphere. Write and talk about what you do to as wide an audience as you can. … Frame a career that along with the refereed article and research monograph includes and justifies the opinion piece and the blog commentary - and craft a writing style that is knowledgeable and keenly analytic and has a public reach. (543)

Some seven years later in a "Bonus Episode" of the inaugural *Pedagogue* podcast, Mike reiterated his point even more strongly in his response to Shane Wood's question about how higher education is represented: "Who Says What (And What Gets Told) About Higher Education?"

> So I guess my answer is, like Sisyphus, it may be a near impossible task, but we just kind of keep coming at it and keep coming at it in every possible way that we have of conveying the reality of the work we do and the people who are in our classrooms. Maybe what we're talking about here is the need for all of us who do this kind of work, regardless of where we do it, to see ourselves not only as teachers, and possibly as scholars of writing and rhetoric, but also as writers or communicators or rhetoricians.

Here, then, in asking us to open our classroom doors even more, Mike creates a new public teaching-related role for all of us.

Third: *How Can a Practice of Critical Reflection, Located in the "We" of All Teachers, Benefit Our Students?*

Mike Rose's disposition was critically reflective. Reflection, of course, can take a myriad of forms, from exploration and synthesis to self-assessment and theory-building. Despite these differences, however, at its core reflection is a meaning-making activity. The specific meaning Mike made

in his reflections took the form of *critical reflection*, one especially sensitive to larger structures, particularly those embedded in power relations. And as Stephen Brookfield explains, critical reflection is an especially helpful practice for teachers.

> Reflection becomes critical when it has two distinct purposes. The first is to understand how considerations of power undergird, frame and distort educational processes and interactions. The second is to question assumptions and practices that seem to make our teaching lives easier but actually work against our own long-term best interests. (8)

With his co-authors in "Remediation as Social Construct: Perspectives from an Analysis of Classroom Discourse," Mike demonstrates such critical reflection through looking at the classroom, especially the "remedial" classroom, and in doing so, carefully plotting relationships between a small classroom study and the larger contexts in which it is situated and to which it responds. In a classroom discussion leading to instructions for a formal writing assignment, a student discourses surprisingly, interrupting it and–worse–taking the class discussion off (the teacher's) track. The teacher sees someone not ready for college; Mike sees a student enriching the conversation while, admittedly, taking the conversation to a topic that (1) the teacher hadn't anticipated and (2) isn't directly related to the assignment. Although the teacher is correct on both counts, as Mike points out, excluding the student's contribution means that "Maria's moment for contributing a piece of knowledge is lost, and so is an opportunity for the class to consider an important issue" (Hull et al. 309).

Drawing a larger lesson from this individual one, and despite our best intentions, Mike says, we teachers can too easily think of student efforts as motivated by deficits, can too often fail to observe what students do bring to school with them, rather than what we want them to bring. Moreover, he understands this tendency as a problem we *all* need to confront and address. How, he asks,

> can we as teachers and researchers examine our assumptions about remediation and remedial writing and remedial students? How can we be alert to deficit explanations for the difficulties that students experience in our classrooms? We have four suggestions: remembering teacher development, attending to classroom discourse, making macro-micro connections, and rethinking the language of cultural difference. (316)

These four suggestions seem as valid, necessary, and helpful today as they did in 1991 when Mike was outlining them, and one of them, of

course, especially belongs in the WPA wheelhouse: *teacher development*. Pointing to a 1981 special issue of *the Journal of Basic Writing* focusing on preparing teachers for remedial writing classrooms and featuring a host of well-known WPAs—including Harvey Wiener, Richard Gebhardt, Charles Moran, Donald McQuade and Marie Ponsot—Mike reminds us that "We need to spend some time thinking about teacher development--not just what knowledge to impart about writing, but how to develop the ability to question received assumptions about abilities and performance, how to examine the thinking behind the curricula we develop and the assessments we make" (318). Indeed, as Mike argues, all teachers, novice and expert, benefit from examining assumptions, especially as we continue to widen the classroom door to student contributions.[1] We might even think of teaching, Mike says, "as an ongoing flow of moments of invitation and moments of denial. The better, the more effective the teaching, the richer and more frequent the moments of invitation, encouragement, and assistance" (318).

In this article about an individual classroom, about teachers writ large, and about teacher development, Mike and his colleagues emphasize the community of teachers through the repeated use of the term we; it appears 151 times. Given that frequency, it's worth pausing to consider who the we includes, as the following excerpt suggests.

> *We write this paper* believing that, however great the distance our profession has come in understanding the students and the writing we call "re- medial," *we have not yet come far enough in critically examining our assumptions about our students' abilities—assumptions which both shape the organization of remedial programs and orient daily life in remedial classrooms.* Engaging in such an examination is not so easy, perhaps because *as teachers of remedial writing, we have good intentions* …. (299; italics mine)

A first we is that of the authors: "We write this paper. . . ."

A second we is that of the field: "we have not yet come far enough in critically examining our assumptions about our students' abilities--assumptions which both shape the organization of remedial programs and orient daily life in remedial classrooms."

And a third we is, quite simply, teachers: "as teachers of remedial writing, we have good intentions . . ."

These separate we's overlap: the classroom teacher participates in the field by virtue of her practice, as do we all. Notably, there's no hierarchy here, no dichotomy, no experienced teacher vs. novice, no enlightened teacher vs. a deficit-oriented one. And perhaps most importantly, there is no

blame: we all have such assumptions, drawing on them is a natural practice, and we can do better. Put another way: community members participate in overlapping communities of teachers who, working together, can focus our efforts on increasing *moments of invitation, encouragement, and assistance.*

Interestingly, too, the article itself is positioned not so much as an argument, but rather as an invitation to collective reflection through which teachers can examine their "basic assumptions" and consider ways of changing them, "building from a different ground":

> Our hope, then, is that this paper will be an occasion to reflect on the ways we, teachers, can inadvertently participate in the social construction of attitudes and beliefs about remediation which may limit the learning that takes place in our classrooms, and to consider some ways in which we can begin to examine these basic assumptions, building from a different ground our notions about our students' abilities and the nature of literacy learning. (300)

These three questions are important for all of us who teach writing as they are for WPAs, who teach writing and teachers of writing; who design programs; who communicate across campuses; and, as per Mike Rose, who reach out to the wider world. He cautions us that in doing all this, we do better by connecting with others than by separating from them, given that we all participate in the same common good.

Located in three key legacies–a reflective conceptualization of the public; the human act of teaching and the promise of teaching more humanely; and the need to share that experience widely–Mike Rose's legacy focused, quite simply, smartly, and generously, on helping all of us do better.

Note

1. Some programs in higher education are engaging in such practices. See, for example, Oregon State University's Insight Resume (reported in Yancey). See also University of Buffalo's ePortfolio program; student grades, achievement of outcomes, *and* student perceptions of learning are collected and developed for program enhancement. This latter program is also unusual in that it (1) includes artifacts from outside the institution and (2) permits evidence of, and reflection on, student failure. See Kohler et al., and Emerson and Reid.

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