

## Once You're Seen You Can't Unsee

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*This contribution describes the way that Mike Rose weaved story, research, and commentary, and challenged us to question simple counting as a way to understand readiness, competence, and literacy and to see student writers deeply. Rose's work continues to have deep implications for the work of WPAs and writing teacher/scholars.*

The first time I read Mike Rose's *Lives on the Boundary* I could not put it down. Like Rose, I grew up in the Los Angeles area. I was the child of working-class parents. My father, an immigrant from Brazil, worked in food service, and my mother, a white woman whose family transplanted from Detroit to Southern California in the late 1950s, was a medical technician. Like Rose's parents, my parents "had heard that quality schooling meant private, Catholic schooling, so they somehow got the money together" to send me to Catholic school (Rose 23).

In 1994, I ended up at UCLA and I was completely out of my league. As a first-generation student, I felt deeply that the university was not for students like me, and, without any institutional understanding, I assumed this was a personal shortcoming. Fortunately, I was a student in the Academic Advancement Program (AAP), the program Rose called EOP. I spent my years at UCLA immersed in the culture of learning in Campbell Hall, first as a student attending tutoring and then as a tutor in the Humanities Lab. Campbell Hall was constantly abuzz with learning. There were days when we could not even find a table in the humanities lab, so we would sit on the floor, or when the tutoring group was so big that we had to move outside to the patio. It was in Campbell Hall that I learned about being a writer in community with other writers. As AAP tutors, we had to meet with the professors teaching the classes we were tutoring. I went to meet with the professor of English 10A -- the first part of the British Literature series. As we sat in his office, he sincerely lectured me about "those AAP students" and their deficits. When he stopped, I said "I am an AAP student. I look forward to helping my peers with your class." His look taught me so much about the way that deficit thinking is about the failure to see students.

In many ways, Rose's *Lives* was ahead of its time, as if Rose were preparing us for the reality of the neo-liberal university. In it, Rose questioned the ways we measure literacy, noting, "When in doubt or when scared or when pressed, count" (209). Rose called out counting as a lazy way to understand

readiness, competence, and literacy. He argued, “our basic orientations toward the teaching and testing of literacy contribute to our inability to see” and he saw the stories in *Lives* as a way to “encourage us to sit close by as people use language and consider, as we listen, the orientations that limit our field of vision” (205).

To help us see, Mike Rose wove story with research and commentary masterfully, and it was the story that often stood out. I have never forgotten the UCLA dean who Mike Rose wrote about in “The Language of Exclusion” who “referred to students in remedial English as ‘the truly illiterate among us’” (352). Rose told the story of that dean so we both understand Rose’s facts and argument and so that we would remember when we make administrative choices, we are making them about students, not numbers. Rose made sure we would never forget Mr. MacFarland, the teacher who changed Rose’s relationship with literacy and with schooling. He told that story to remind us of the potential for teachers to effect change and to remind us that “students will float to the mark you set” (*Lives* 26). In *Lives*, Rose told the stories of Laura and Bobby set against the stark contrast of his description of the UCLA campus where the affluence “hits you most forcefully at lunchtime” (3) so that we see what Laura and Bobby might see and why Bobby might say, “We don’t belong at UCLA, do we?” (4). As Rose told these stories of others, so too he told own story of accessing school and the university. Rose laid bare the challenges of schooling and academic life in a way that is honest and that most of us had never read before up to that point.

It is no wonder I felt seen by Rose’s method of weaving story, research, and commentary. It is because in his scholarship Mike Rose challenged us to question simple counting and to look and see deeply. Rose’s work continues to have deep implications for the work of WPAs and writing teachers and scholars. Programmatically, we should question the counting that we use to evaluate and sort students, especially students who may be labeled unprepared. In my article for this journal (2018), I recommend using case studies to better see and understand the students in our programs, rather than counting to sort and label. In teaching, we want to deeply understand our students and the rich literacies they bring with them to the university. Most semesters, I use snippets from chapter two of *Lives* to inspire students in telling their literacy histories and stories. As they respond to Rose’s stories with their own, I learn to see them and their literacies. As a scholar, though, Rose has encouraged me most to bring stories into my scholarship. There is pressure in the field to move away from story to legitimize our research. But it is important to focus our research around the stories of those who are often unseen in order to *expand* our field of vision.

I started this vignette with my story so you might see me and understand a time in my life when I felt unseen as a writer and learner. The legacy of Mike Rose's work is that through story we learn to see deeply. This continues to have profound implications for the many layers of our work: programmatic, teaching, research. When we center story, we can see the things we might miss about writers if we simply count.

#### WORKS CITED

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