

Episode 1: Mike Rose, pt. 1

Pedagogue podcast

Transcript

Welcome to Pedagogue, a podcast about teachers talking writing. I'm your host, Shane Wood.

Before we get started, I wanted to give you the purpose behind Pedagogue. Each episode will be a conversation with a teacher about their experiences teaching writing, it will be about their work, and their inspirations, about what they do inside the classroom—their assignments, assessments. And they'll reflect on their successes and their failures. *Pedagogue* is dedicated to promoting diverse voices at various institutions and designed to help foster community and collaboration among teachers.

My hope is for us to be encouraged, for us to be inspired, for us to listen and to learn from one another. For us to be *that* community. I'm thankful for those who have supported me. I sent out this post about a potential podcast and it circulated. And here we are. I hope that you follow along, that you listen to these great teachers, the great work that people are doing elsewhere, that you are inspired. That your pedagogy is transformed. All for the betterment of our students.

If you're a secondary or postsecondary teacher in high school or elementary school, if you're a graduate student or teacher-scholar, whether you're teaching in community colleges, four-year universities, HBCU's, Hispanic-Serving Institutions, I'd love to hear from you. This podcast exists based on your voice. If you're interested in contributing, please visit pedagoguepodcast.com and fill out the contact form. Again, that's pedagoguepodcast.com.

For our first episode, I'm happy and excited to welcome someone who has potentially inspired all of us. Over the last forty years, he has taught in a range of educational settings, from kindergarten to job training and adult literacy programs. He is currently a faculty member in the UCLA Graduate School of Education and Information Studies. He has written on language, literacy, and cognition and has received numerous awards. Author of eleven books, including *Lives on the Boundary*.

Please welcome Mike Rose.

SW: Mike, thanks so much for joining us. I want to start with a teaching question. In a 2015 interview in the Kenyon Review, this is what you say about teaching: "Teaching draws you into people's lives, into the workings of their minds, the processing of information, solving problems, new ideas clashing with old. The result can be interest, frustration, struggle, achievement." I like that a lot. I see teaching as a continual state of "becoming." Think back to the first time you stepped foot into the classroom. Maybe the day before. What were you thinking? How were you feeling? And what did you think teaching was going to be like?

MR: Wow. You know, it was so long ago that I'm not sure my memory is going to be that specific. But I can tell you what the situation was and maybe as we talk about it some thoughts

will come back to me. The first actual teaching I did was when I was 24, and I had just joined the program called the Teacher Corps. It's no longer around. But it was one of the Johnson Era War on Poverty programs. It was kind of affiliated with Vista, but Vista tended to be focused on community work, whereas Teacher Corps would place folks like me in communities of need and we would work with existing schools.

There would be teams of four interns. And then we would have what we called a "team leader." This was a person who was an experienced teacher in that district. And it was sort of a guru, our guide, knew everything and knew everybody, and guided us four little ducklings around the community and the school.

So there I was. I was 24. I had started a PhD program in English and realized it wasn't for me. And then I had taken a year of courses in Psychology because I thought well, maybe that's the route I wanted to go, and that was at a time when academic psychology was still pretty heavily experimental in its orientation in a way that just didn't capture me. So, at 24 I joined this program and set out with my team to a community called El Monte which is east of East Los Angeles. At that time, it was a working class White and Latino community and we were assigned to an elementary school. Trying to think back, I had been meeting with my team for the whole summer. We organized around a local college or university, in our case, it was USC. So for the whole summer, this team of four people with our team leader, Ben Campos, we spent that summer reading books, and talking with each other, getting to know each other, and Ben took us through the community of El Monte. I mean we met everybody. We met the priest, we met the mechanic, we met parents, we met kids, we met teachers. And just became deeply acquainted with community. So by the time school started and I was ready to walk into the first day with this teacher who I would be working with, we already knew the community. And that was a hugely important feature of this program. I wish teacher education programs today had more of that component.

I'm trying now in my best, Shane, to think back to what that was like, and I can tell you I had the really good fortune of being connected with a woman named Rosalie Naumann, who was just a magnificent 5th and 6th grade teacher. So I think going into those first few weeks, I was probably pretty uncertain. I didn't know what the hell I was doing exactly. I felt comfortable in the community because we had been there. I felt comfortable with my teammates. I felt very comfortable with Ben and his advice. And I had gotten to know Rosalie the week or two before. But in terms of what I expected, I got to tell you, I didn't know much, and my recollection, hazy as it is, is that I was pretty green and pretty nervous and really willing to follow the lead of this teacher, Rosalie, who fortunately was just as skilled as could be. Those were my first weeks of teaching with a bunch of 6th graders, primarily working class White and Latino kids so that was where I first cut my teeth on reading and writing, on teaching reading and writing with this group of kids. I was green. I was young. I didn't know what the hell I was doing. And was kind of excited to see what would happen.

SW: Your sense of excitement for being in the classroom and teaching, building a community of students and getting to know them has remained the same since you were 24 years old. But I'm curious as to what has changed, or how you are still "becoming" as a teacher?

MR: Yeah, yeah, what an interesting question. I've got to say I am so lucky that I love to teach, probably more, actually, than I did then. I was eager to do it. I was scared. And trepidatious. I still have a little tinge of that anticipation, I guess, when I walk into a classroom. But I'm just blessed that it means as much to me now or more as it did when I started out. So what has changed? Well, hopefully I have gotten better at it. You know, you just pick up so many tricks of the trade along the way: how to ask a question, how to give feedback, how to spot when someone is having a difficult time with something, how to see through and understand various kinds of reluctance or resistance. You know, there's just so much you pick up with time. Hopefully, I have learned a lot in that regard.

As I said, I'm still as excited, maybe even more so, about the kind of interaction teaching involves. There's something profoundly special it seems to me about having the good fortune to teach because you really are participating with other people in their development. I mean, what other kind of work allows you to do that? I guess certain kinds of pastoral counseling and therapy, maybe certain kinds of medicine or certain ways medicine is practiced. But you know there's not many occupations that provide that opportunity to get close into people's lives and help them grow in a way they want to grow. So that, so that just captivates me still and means so much to me.

You know, you asked also about maybe what I've learned and how I've changed. I can tell you that one big thing that's changed is when I was younger a fair amount of the teaching that I did, for a period of 7, 8, 9 years, a fair amount of it was large, large classes, like "Introduction to the American Novel" for non-English majors, kinds of classes, right, where there would be hundreds of people. And I really liked the performative dimension of it. I worked very hard to be prepared, have lots of wonderful stuff at the ready. I also worked really hard to make that room of 200 as intimate as I could. I would walk up and down the aisles; I would call people's names. I would try to engage 200 people in a conversation. I just loved the whole thing, the whole performative element of it, the whole trying to turn a large room into something more dialogic. Now, I must say, that has changed profoundly. I mean I can still do that. I can still get up in front of a large group of people, but what I find just so wonderful now is working in much smaller groups. In fact, I'll break up even a class I'm teaching into smaller groups that I will work with for X amount of time and then they'll leave, and the next group will come in just so I can get that closer interaction.

I've also come to appreciate how important listening is. I guess in our field, certainly, it's Krista Ratcliffe, right, who has written about listening. I have really, I can't tell you what a fundamental pedagogical skill listening has become for me over the decades. I think the better you can hear what someone is asking when they ask a question, or the better you can hear what someone is trying to do with a piece of writing, and the better you are at remembering all that so that you're able to bring it up weeks later in connection with something somebody else says, so that kind of really focused and targeted, serious listening is just so rare. Period. I mean think of it, how many people do you know that really listen to you when you sit down to talk with them?

So that dimension of teaching has just amped up for me. Therefore, that whole large class performative thing has faded in interest for me, and more and more I find myself desiring these close-knit and intimate interactions where you have to work really hard in a focused way to understand where somebody is at, where they are trying to go, what it is they are trying to do with a piece of writing, and how to help them get there.

SW: You've taught various kinds of students, Mike. One thing you bring up is how we're in this unique position as teachers to really see and watch our students develop and grow. And even us, we're growing in the classroom as teachers. We're adapting and changing depending upon the students that we're teaching. And that's a really special position to be in, something that I love about being a teacher. At the same time, as teachers, we never get to fully see, depending upon our situation, the growth and the development of students. We have a very short, limited time with them, and the reality is, I won't get to see many of those students again. But they've changed me. And hopefully, our conversations have made us better. So I guess my question is, Mike, what have they taught you? What have you learned from them about teaching or writing?

MR: Well, you put your finger on something there. First of all, back to that point you made a moment earlier – just within the 10 to 15 weeks of a term – you're right, you and that class are evolving. It's not a static social situation at all. You're getting to know some people better, and you're getting to participate, as I said, in their lives and they also are getting to know you. So as this dynamic involves so does the interaction and so does what's possible for the two of you, or you and everybody in class. So that point you made is an interesting one. I haven't quite thought about it that way – what you got over the span of a 10- or 15-week term is a kind of mutual evolution of a relationship, a connection. With every class you teach you're learning more and more about other human beings. You're learning more and more about language and literacy or whatever subject it is that you're teaching. You're learning a lot about learning, and teaching. So this all accumulates. You mention writing. All of this stuff plays into my writing. I could not write the stuff I write if I wasn't teaching. There's a kind of intimate connection between the classroom and the written page for me. The two things are interactive and inseparable.

My mother was a career waitress her whole life. She used to talk about the restaurant. Now, my mother had to quit school in the 7th grade to take care of the others kids in her family – not an uncommon story for immigrant women of her time, unfortunately. She was also so intellectually curious. She used to talk about the restaurant as being this remarkable place where she learned so much. She used to say that not a day that goes by in the restaurant when you didn't learn something. I think the same thing is true for the classroom. You're learning about learning, you're learning about the way you interact with people, you're learning about other people. And of all this stuff becomes part, in my case, the writing. Part of my own development.

SW: Earlier you talked about listening and the importance of listening to students. And to me, any "good" teacher is a really good listener. Shows values of accessibility and inclusivity, this willingness to really listen carefully. So, my next question is: as we listen to students and their experiences, and even as we listen to our colleagues, other teachers, I think that we get different

senses, and thoughts, and emotions, right? This is when maybe the classroom and the space outside the classroom is most vulnerable, is whenever we're listening to how people are feeling or what they're thinking. So I'm thinking along the lines of we hear thoughts and even experience thoughts of unbelonging, we have anxieties, or we have this fear of failure. And quite possibly, it's something that unites all of us. Teachers and students alike. I'm curious as to how you go about encouraging the teacher and the student having these doubts? What do you say to that individual? And also, I'm thinking specifically how those feelings and those thoughts can be a central part to the success of the classroom, you know that they can bring us together, right? That we can share them, so instead of having to think through or experience those doubts in isolation, that we can bring those uncertainties to a collaborative space and that we can see that in a positive light, and not a negative one.

MR: Oh man, I still have them! I'm struggling with a piece of writing right now and all those furry footed demons come trotting out. You know, "You're not smart enough, you don't have the juice, blah blah blah blah blah." You know, all that chatter. I'm hip to those little demons. But I also think that it's probably a good thing for us as teachers to be visited by them because it does remind us of what a number of our students probably feel much more intensely. Certainly around writing. You know, I mean, so Shane, I work in a graduate school of education now at UCLA which gets ranked consistently at the very tippy top of these college rankings. I don't put a lot of credence in these rankings but they reflect something and they matter to the people in the program. So what's interesting is that among this very special group of students I cannot tell you how much doubt comes just gushing forth as we start to talk about writing. Writing, for many of them, for these very accomplish people, is just fraught with anxiety. They get nervous about it. They feel that they're inadequate. There's just so much emotion that emerges around it. And it never fails at least once a week there's somebody in my office crying over a piece of writing.

And that's striking to me. I don't think it's a bad thing that those of us teaching are every once in a while are beset by self-doubt about our work because it enables us to be somewhat empathic to what our students, no matter how advanced they are. It's amazing what writing calls up.

SW: It is amazing and special how personal writing is and what it does to and for us. That's all for now. But in our next episode, this conversation continues. Mike Rose talks about valuing interdisciplinary knowledge in the classroom, he reflects on giving feedback to student writing, and he shares his tentative title for his new book. I'm your host, Shane Wood. Thank you for listening to our first episode. This is Pedagogue. And I end with this: thank you for teaching, thank you for caring. Until next time.