Episode 2: Mike Rose, pt. 2
Pedagogue podcast
Transcript

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

In our first episode, I got to sit down and talk with Mike Rose, an inspirational teacher and scholar with over 40 years of teaching from kindergarten to UCLA, who has really impacted education and writing studies. What stood out to me from that conversation was how careful of a listener Mike Rose is. I was inspired by the way he talked about teaching, the way he connected teaching to his life, the way he said teaching and writing had this interconnected relationship. He encouraged us to really pay attention, as teachers, to really listen to our students, to be present, to hear them.

In Episode 1, Mike talked about his first experience teaching, teaching 6th graders in El Monte, California, which was a White and Latino community. He shared how he's changed as a teacher, the intimate connection between teaching and writing, and how he continues to feel a sense of unbelonging.

Before this, I didn't know Mike. In our email exchanges and conversations, he was so genuine. So kind. So intentional. And the way he talked about teaching in our first episode is just who he is as a person. I decided to break our conversation into two episodes. So here we are. Episode 2, a continued conversation with Mike Rose. In this episode, he talks about valuing interdisciplinary knowledge in the classroom, he shares how he responds to student writing, he talks about what he's reading, and his tentative title to his new book.

SW: Mike, thank you again, for joining us. We'll start with another teaching question, but more specifically, a question about how we can promote and foster an interdisciplinary classroom, that is, even if we are teaching one subject, how we can draw on and bring in different knowledge and curriculum. You know I've been thinking a lot about how the majority of students come to college, study something, and then get a job in another field or discipline. You have an interdisciplinary background: English, Psychology, Education. How has that background helped you as a teacher? Helped you create a classroom that values interdisciplinary knowledge?

MR: You know, so, I have a couple ways to respond to that. One is in the current work I do that interdisciplinarity really comes in handy because one of the courses I teach is one I developed in the School of Ed, and it's a graduate level course in professional writing, so the students who enroll in that class come from the different specializations within the School of Ed. So somebody is in Higher Ed, and somebody else is in Early Childhood Development, yet somebody else is in Advanced Statistics and Measurements. That interdisciplinary background becomes really handy as I'm working with these students from these different subfields of education.

When I was teaching undergraduates, I was really influenced by that whole writing across the curriculum business that emerged, you know, in composition studies back in the 1980s with Elaine Maimon and these folks. In fact, a textbook (*Critical Strategies for Academic Thinking and Writing*) that I did with Mal Kiniry really did rely on that cross disciplinary background of mine. We had readings from the sciences, the humanities, the social sciences, the arts, and we created a whole series of assignments for freshman composition that drew on all these different subject areas at an attempt to both provide materials that would be relevant or closer to a student's major or interest as well as to try to give people some sense of the different writing contexts and situations they would face as they moved across their lower division curriculum.

Now, you know, there's been a lot of argument back and forth as to whether that's even possible, and lots of debate about the notion of discourse communities and all of that. But that was what we were trying to do and my interdisciplinary background became just hugely helpful as we were trying to do that kind of work. So I've been really lucky, Shane, in having that background. And it plays out in my writing. In the writing that I do, I do try to draw on my background in cognitive psychology, and the little bit I know about anthropology, some of the other social sciences that I studied as well as my background in literature as well as my background in writing and rhetorical studies.

SW: In our first episode, you shared how students have this fear and this anxiety that comes through writing, how that's a common feeling for students to have regardless of writing abilities. Writing is personal, intimate, it influences us, it makes us think certain thoughts and feel certain emotions. Writing is vulnerable. The entire process, perhaps, is an exposure of who we are as people. Can you talk me through the ways in which you give feedback? What does that process look like for you? How do you support student agency in the writing process?

MR: So now I work with about 20 doctoral students in this class, and as I said I break this class up into subgroups so that I'm able to give much more individual attention to people. And my typical mode of giving feedback is the following. Imagine that there's one group after another group after another group after another group of four to five people and they each week bring in their two to three pages of some major project they are working on. It could be a conference paper, it could be their dissertation proposal, or what not. And we treat it just like as if it were like a creative writing workshop. You know, they come in, they have two or three pages a week, and I make them read it out loud so they hear their prose because many of the students in the graduate school of education come from the social sciences so they've never had the experience to actually hear their writing as writing. So it begins with them reading, and then I ask the reader what she or he has to say about the piece having it just heard it read out in public. So they get first crack. Then, the rest of the group participates and gives feedback. Then, at the end I'll try to sum things up and say some summative things about their piece. And that is sort of the first phase, if you will, of how I give feedback.

I listen to what other people had to say about the piece, I listen to what the writer had to say about the piece, and then I try to sum up and focus all of that conversation about the writing in a

way that I think will be most helpful. Maybe I'll trim some of the suggestions down to one or two big ones, or maybe I'll emphasize a particular problem that they brought up themselves when they were, you know, taking their first crack at speaking about their writing. The oral dimension of this feedback and this group process of giving feedback is really important. And then what often happens is that I follow that up with some written comments on the paper.

And those comments range all the way, Shane, from this is how you use a semicolon to what are the assumptions behind this particular methodology that you are using here, can you say a little bit more, can you spell out a little more specifically in a sentence or two why it is you are choosing to use this particular methodology to study this particular problem. So it's a multi-stage and multilayered process of giving feedback. It's pretty labor intensive. And it might be followed up with an email from me. But I feel, at least, like I'm giving it my best shot to give them some kind of feedback that they can use to improve the piece.

SW: So Mike it seems like you delay the written part of feedback, which might come to a surprise to many of us who teach writing, you know, at least in the first-year writing classroom, maybe not so much the creative writing classroom. So the surprise, I guess, you know, is that you don't give written feedback right away which maybe some of us do throughout the process on early drafts and later drafts. Maybe we even use peer review in the classroom but it might not necessarily look like how you just described. I mean it seems that students first read their writing out loud and then their peers give them oral feedback, and then you give them oral feedback. I imagine students aren't really used to this. So how do they respond to this type of feedback? And what about the nature of the feedback? You know, does it always come across as negotiable and dialogic?

MR: Yeah, so it turns out this is a type of shameful comment about higher education, although it's not going to come as a surprise to anybody listening to this, that they've never gotten feedback like this. You know most of them didn't go to a small liberal arts college and major in English or Comparative Literature or History where they would be doing a lot of writing and hopefully getting some comments on it. They tend to be coming out of large social science majors where they've gotten very limited feedback on their writing and very limited commentary on it, and therefore, very limited opportunity for them to become conscious of themselves as writers. It seems like something I hear again and again and again at the end of class on evaluations and things like that, it's really a course at the graduate level, a course that helps them come to see themselves as writers, what that kind of agency, what that rhetorical agency enables them to do with language that they maybe weren't quite aware of before. So the end product of the course may be more a kind of shift in the mental model of what it means to write than any specific idea of helping them with sentence style.

One more thing to say that I think is really interesting. So I probably am going to run into disagreement about this, but I believe in being pretty specific in the feedback that I give people. So you know that stage when I'm scribbling things on their paper or even when I'm giving them oral feedback, I don't hesitate when I see that their stuck, I don't hesitate to either say or write

out this kind of thing: "You know when I listen to you Sam or Jane talk about what you're doing here, it seems to me that the sentence you need right here is a sentence that does this…" And I'll either write out or speak out the kind of sentence that I think they need to have in that particular place to do what they want to do.

And the reason that I give them that level of specific feedback, which again I understand some people might disagree with, is that sometimes I think we might slip into the mistake that assuming when we tell people something in the abstract about writing that they're going to get it, particularly that's problematic when people haven't had a lot of experience as writers or seeing themselves as writers. So I just find it much more useful to actually model for them what a sentence would look like that would do what it is that they're trying to do rather than giving them some kind of abstract advice.

SW: I want to add on to that if you don't mind. I feel like there's two big things here that we can do or think about pedagogically as teachers when it comes to response: the first is maybe calling us to be more aware of the familiarity students have with feedback, that is, are we using feedback that students aren't familiar with which isn't really helping their writing at all because maybe they don't know what to do with it. So as teachers, maybe we should have explicit conversations about the types of responses they're used to or students' experiences with previous feedback. And the second, which I think goes along with that, is maybe calling us to be more aware of the limitations of different educational situations. For example, maybe peer review works really well in a graduate class with only 10 or 12 students. But that's a pretty privileged position when it comes to using that type of feedback, right? I mean I'm thinking about high school teachers who see and teach 180 kids a day where peer review, due to limited time, due to the amount of students, due to having to cover other state-mandated material, just doesn't seem as possible. Does that make sense? I guess, what I'm saying is how being aware with what students are familiar with and what limitations are on other spaces can really change the way we think about and give response?

MR: Yeah, and you're bringing up a really important point here about the economics and politics of all this. Yeah, boy, I mean when you think about the number of papers and students that most teachers have it absolutely works against giving the kind of feedback we're talking about. I absolutely realize what a luxury I have with working with 20 students at a pop, let's say, which then facilitates that kind of feedback, makes it possible. So I'm trying to be very conscious here about the privilege I have but I do think it is legitimate for us to wonder what kind of undergraduate experience they had especially when some of them are coming out of "good" universities and go through their entire four or five years as undergraduates and never have the experience of having a single person or a single professor or teaching assistant or reader give them enough feedback of a kind that affects their writing or affects their sense of themselves as writers. That's interesting to me. That's interesting to me. But I absolutely take your point about the conditions under which most people receive the writing instruction they receive.

SW: Mike, I want to end, first, with what are you reading? And second, what are you writing about? You mentioned a couple of times about how you're struggling through the writing process. What are you writing about? Do you mind sharing with us?

MR: Mmm. So unfortunately, I don't read anywhere near as much as I'd like to especially when I'm working on something because all the reading I do tends to be driven by the project in front of me. But a book that I did read in the past couple months for this project I'm currently working on is by the British philosopher of education, Israel Scheffler, it's simply called *Of Human Potential*. And it's a philosophical treatise about ability and potential. And I just found it to be really engaging and compelling little book because I'm always thinking about these questions of intelligence and ability and the way we measure and assess them and talk about them and the affect that has on folks, especially folks not born on the advantaged side of the social structure. So that's a book I've been reading and getting some richness from as I try to wrap up this current project I'm working on.

So, as I think you know, my own academic background was kind of spotty and it wasn't until my senior year of high school when I had an English teacher who turned my life around. Until then, I was kind of sleep walking through school and through life in general. I've been fascinated by that kind of experience for a very long time, and I've encountered it again and again and again in all kinds of ways in all the different work I've done, both the teaching and research. And that is this business where somehow school, education becomes meaningful in a way it wasn't up until a particular point. And that ranges from someone who dropped out of high school and went into the workforce and had a hard time with just low-skill entry-level jobs and in their 30s and 40s they go back and get a GED and changes, you know, changes their job opportunities a bit and changes the way they think about themselves. So ranging all the way from that to the person who is already at the university and is majoring in engineering and then suddenly takes some course from somebody that just makes them realize oh my God what I really want to do is go into healthcare in this particular way working on human machine interaction.

So this, I'm fascinated by these kind of moments of coming to a sort of an awareness of what education can mean. So I interviewed 100 people ranging all the way again from the person in their 30s and 40s who is getting their GED to the professional person who has this kind of enlightenment about schooling, when they're well into school. So, I'm just interested in looking closely at these transformational moments – these moments when education goes from being one thing or meaning one thing or not meaning much at all to meaning something much different, and more powerful, and more meaningful and relevant to oneself. And no big surprise that reflects a pivotal shift in my own life so I begin telling a little bit about that personal story and then open the book up to these range of 100 stories, folks who in some way or another have this kind of shift in what education means.

So you can see then why reading a book, a philosophical treatise on human potential becomes so interesting to me right now. Because what we're talking about really takes us to the heart of these

questions about ability and potential and how we assess that and how it can emerge in various ways that are not necessarily expected.

The tentative title of the book is *When the Light Goes On*.

SW: There you have it – When the Light Goes On. Mike, thank you for sharing that and thank you for joining me. I've really enjoyed our time together and I'm really thankful for you and your willingness to sit down and talk about teaching.

MR: Oh, Shane, it was my pleasure. Thank you so much for asking the good questions and asking me to participate.