

Pedagogue Bonus: Who Says What (And What Gets Told) About Higher Education? (w/Mike Rose)

Transcript

Welcome to Pedagogue Bonus, a short episode that covers a single topic or question. I'm your host, Shane Wood.

In this episode, I'm fortunate enough to talk with a listener and a good friend of the podcast, Mike Rose. Mike called me a while back and said, "Shane, my wheels have been spinning, and I just keep thinking about this question, and that's who says what about higher education?" In a blog post that got picked up by the Washington Post, Mike asked a similar question: Who should be writing about education and isn't? In that post, Mike was critical of mass media and the stories that get told and circulated about higher education, how these stories are published by newspapers and magazines with wide reach, how these headlines are read and consumed by the public, but how the journalists writing these pieces are nowhere near teaching, nowhere near the classroom or the institutions they're writing about and nowhere near the real lives of students.

And now, here we are with a Pedagogue Bonus episode: who says what (and what gets told) about higher education? Mike, I want to connect this question and this conversation to your book, *Back to School*. In it, you talk about higher education, and you bring attention to the realities of the educational landscape; that is, the number of students who don't enroll in college right out of high school and the number of people who don't go to Ivy League schools and four-year institutions. In the book, you spend time at a community college. You write about your interactions with nontraditional students. You talk about their stories, their family, their histories, and you really describe what you see. Here's a short excerpt.

The room is old and dingy, no windows, bare except for the irregular rows of desks, the table with a projector, a cart holding pipes and metal bars, and in the corner, a worn flag from the American Welding Society. You're trying to take it all in when a sullen guy in an oversized T-shirt, a bandana around his head, walks over to you and asks, "What are you doing here?" ...and that guy who wanted to know what you're doing here, well, it's a legitimate question, isn't it? And everything depends on how you answer it. When it was posed to me, I said I was here to study programs like this one because we need to know more about them to convince our politicians that we need more of them.

I think that's a pretty good spot to end, Mike. I want to just give you space to talk about what you're thinking and to expand on your conversations in *Back to School* about higher education and who says what and what gets told.

MR: First of all, thank you so much for having me on the podcast again, Shane. It's an honor. I am grateful for the opportunity, and first of all, let me admit, by the way, that I obviously had a very kind of privileged position in being able to spend a couple of years at this particular college that I wrote *Back to School* from. It draws on lots of other experiences too, but the primary body of evidence comes from a couple of years spent at this community college. Obviously, I'm not one of the folks teaching English in that community college and facing all of the demands on my

time that would make writing a book like this a really arduous task, particularly if I had a family and I have young kids and that. So let me admit right up front that fact.

I want to talk a bit today about something that's really been on my mind, what gets covered about higher education, and I think I'm right in saying that often, a lot of what gets written about or the kinds of schools that get written about are the flagship universities and certainly the Ivy League. And when stuff gets written about the schools that really do most of the educating in the United States beyond high school, the state colleges and community colleges, those stories tend to be pretty much about administrative or budgetary things or political scrambles or whatnot. And when we get stories about students in those institutions, more often than not, they're about the struggles and deficiencies that the students have. And I certainly don't want to downplay the fact that some of the folks who end up going to your local community college, she didn't have a great education beforehand. In my view, that tends to be the focus of the writing about the students in these schools.

Now, fortunately, lately, there's been more coverage I've noticed of this huge swath of higher education institutions, that this is in fact where most people get educated beyond high school in the United States. In a weird way actually, even though the cheating scandal kind of shed an interesting light on this because, in revealing just the terrible abuses of privilege, it does happen that some journalists would talk about the fact that most folks, the reality for most folks is, if they're going to school in their local state college or their local state college or community college. So that's a good turn.

But it then leaves me with this question, and this is the other piece of the pie here. This is what's been getting to me. Who does this writing? Well, most of the writing that we read in newspapers and most of the journalism that we hear on broadcast media and stuff we read in magazines is written by journalists. It's very rare that you have people writing about the community college or the state colleges who themselves work in those institutions. I understand there's all kinds of reasons for that, but it's troubling to me because the kind of intimate knowledge that they have of these institutions and the students just does often not get communicated.

It's kind of the difference between a journalist writing about medicine and a physician writing about medicine. You get a physician writing about medicine, and there's just all kinds of personal touches and insights and wisdoms and case examples and whatnot that represent a deep and powerful knowledge of the work. So, if you read virtually anything about various programs in community colleges and occupational centers, various programs for occupational education or for GED prep or for building basic skills with an eye toward entrance into the workforce, there's lots of these kinds of programs being generated now with community colleges, often in concert with local industry. If you read virtually any account of all of these efforts, the focus is entirely on the economic payoff for the people involved. And in fact, that's what the policy documents that come out of think tanks and state and federal legislative bodies, all of these documents, these policy documents, also stress the economic benefit of being in these kinds of programs.

When you get in close, when you have this kind of insider, close, on the ground knowledge of these institutions and their students and the work itself, you get a more intimate and complex reality. And I guess my big question is who gets to represent all this? And unfortunately, it's

really rare that people who do the work get to do the representing. In a few cases, if people are able to ... I know the demands on their time. For example, folks working in the community colleges, my God, the demands are extraordinary. So to be able to find that time to do some of this kind of writing and go through the agony of revising and getting it right and getting it suitable for the typical opinion page column, I realize what a chore that is. But still, I'm a real big believer in trying to make our voices public in whatever way possible. And that really does start with the letter to the editor of the local paper. And now with the internet, just so many other venues that are available to us.

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.