

Writing as a Process: An Interview with Mike Rose

Introduction

Writing is a cognitive process that includes detailed consideration of the choice of words and the meaning one is attempting to convey. Doctoral candidates and faculty spend a considerable portion of their time writing and productivity in the writing process is linked to career advancement and success. There are a number of articles that discuss productivity of research scholars, difficulties faced by graduate students and faculty in writing with respect to time, and the balance between other obligations of teaching and service. Understanding and reflecting on the writing process, especially the process employed by successful academics and authors such as Mike Rose, tends to make the writing journey a more focused and successful experience. The following interview arose out of a desire to discuss the process of writing with an academic who has produced a varied range of publications.

Dr. Mike Rose is a prolific writer and author of numerous books and articles. His recent books include [*Why School?: Reclaiming Education for All of Us*](#) and *The Mind at Work: Valuing the Intelligence of the American Worker*. His other publications include *Lives on the Boundary: The Struggles and Achievements of America's Educationally Underprepared* and *Possible Lives: The Promise of Public Education in America*. He is a Professor in the Graduate School of Education & Information Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles. His many accolades include honors such as the 2005 UCLA Distinguished Teaching Award, the Grawemeyer Award in Education, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and the Commonwealth Club of California Award for Literary Excellence in Nonfiction. Irrespective of the awards, the most poignant tribute to Dr. Rose is from his advisees and graduate students from his writing class. It is his enthusiasm for writing and willingness to address writing style and accuracy regardless of the doctoral candidates' disciplines that endears him to his students. Dr. Rose's most recent thoughts about writing, among other topics, can be accessed at his blog: <http://mikerosebooks.blogspot.com/>.

Tina Arora is an Assistant Professor in the College of Education at California State University, Long Beach and an alumna of the University of California, Los Angeles and California State University, Los Angeles joint doctoral program. She was recognized as the 2007 UCLA Chancellor's Service Award Recipient, 2007 Education & Research award winner of the CSULA 15th Annual Symposium on Research, Scholarship and Creative Activity, 2006 UCLA Woman for Change Award, and the 2006 UCLA Outstanding Graduate Student Award. Her research

interests broadly include special education intervention and strategies to work with children with moderate to severe disabilities and more specifically children with autism. She is also interested in social justice as it relates to education and the writing process when it applies to doctoral candidates and faculty.

TA: The interdisciplinary focus you display in your work and writing—how do you manage to accomplish that coming from an area of research that is considered to be “a numbers-based area of research”? Once, you did write that you are, “interested in ways to bridge or combine the modes of inquiry...rethinking the barriers that often exist among disciplines, among methodologies and among scholarly and non-scholarly languages.”

MR: Right. Actually my background has been a hybrid one from the beginning. I started out as a graduate student in English and got dissatisfied with that and then, for a year, went and took psychology courses at a time when psychology was pretty behaviorist in its orientation, so I got a good dose of really old-fashioned, behaviorist, experimental, academic psychology. From that point, I was further disillusioned and quit and went and worked in a Great Society program that was called Teacher Corps. And from there, I went to work in a program for returning Vietnam vets who wanted to go to school but whose preparation was really poor, and this was the program that got them up to speed. I also taught in a range of programs for adults. So by the time I came back to graduate school here at UCLA, in the late 70s, my background already was kind of a mix of the humanities and old-style academic psychology. The work I ended up doing here in the School of Education was right at a time when the so-called cognitive revolution was going on. That is when people on our faculty who are now emeritus or have passed on, people like Merl Wittrock, were rethinking old-style educational psychology. I got captivated with this attempt to think about thinking because I had just come from a bunch of years of working in the schools and working in preparatory programs where the foremost thing on my mind was thinking about thinking, thinking about how to help people who had a bum deal in school develop the kind of competencies in academic writing or critical reading that would enable them to make their way through post-secondary education.

These courses I was taking here, in Moore Hall in the late 70s, were really ringing a bell. They were asking these questions like how is knowledge organized and how do we solve problems and those kinds of questions. It turns out, in addition to all that, I was working in a tutoring program here on campus and became part of what was called the Writing Research Project. The Project was put together by

a Vice Chancellor who involved those of us who were working in one way or another with freshmen, trying to help freshmen make their way through this place.

This Writing Research Project introduced me to what was then the emerging field of rhetoric and composition studies, and it was an interdisciplinary venture. You had people who were trained in traditional literary studies or psychology or rhetoric or history of rhetoric, and it was a rich place to be.

Here I was at this very formative period in my life coming back to graduate school with a background in traditional literary studies and some background in traditional academic psychology. I was meeting this new cognitive stuff in graduate school, and I was entering this professional field called rhetoric and composition, that itself was interdisciplinary. You can see that at this really formative time, there was so much coming together that urged in me this multidisciplinary look at things. And if you add onto all of that the fact that I had just been working with different populations where I was thinking all the time about how to help people write better, how to help people become more adequately prepared to handle the critical reading and writing that they are going to face in college.

It was a serendipitous but incredibly fortunate intersection of all these different pieces of my life, certainly not planned. There was no way that I sat down with pencil and paper and sketched all this out. It was one of those sheer, dumb-luck bits of good fortune. So for a very long time, I have been living in several disciplinary worlds and also have had for a very long time this teacher's orientation toward things—a kind of practical, practice-based, problem-solving orientation to education. Maybe because of that I felt discomfort with committing myself to a single discipline. That's why I left English studies; I couldn't imagine myself living the rest of my life as a traditional literary scholar. And that's why I ended up leaving academic psychology because, again, I couldn't imagine a career of doing that kind of work. So there was this restlessness, I guess. This *disease* with professional academic life as it is often practiced within the confines of a single discipline.

TA: Once you became a faculty member, did you find that you tended to stick to one field in your writing, just because of expectations?

MR: I have a very unusual academic background, so it would not serve as an example of a traditional academic trajectory...and I'm not so sure it should serve as a model of any kind. I had the good fortune to have as my dissertation chairman the guy who was then the head of Social Research Methodology, a fellow named Rich Shavelson, who has gone on to become one of the foremost

quantitatively oriented educational psychologists in the country. And he let me do my dissertation on student writing, which was what I knew a lot about. I looked at students who were having a hard, hard time getting words on the page and students who reported being quite fluent. And I looked at their composing processes through cognitive lenses that I was learning from people like Merl Wittrock and Rich Shavelson. So, even my dissertation ended up being this hybrid thing where I was able to bring my teacher interests in student writing into synchronization with the methodological rigor and the cognitive orientation that people like Wittrock and Shavelson were providing me.

Once I got my degree, I ended up working in the UCLA Writing Programs, helping to shape that enterprise. So, you see, I did not have a traditional academic career, I didn't go from the PhD into a tenure track faculty job. In fact, I worked on campus for a number of years in various kinds of administrative positions developing programs, running them, developing curriculum and all that.

One thing that was fortunate for me was that back when I was working in that Writing Research Project, trying to come up with better ways to teach writing on campus—and this was going on while I was in the PhD program—I started doing some writing in the field of rhetoric and composition. So, I wrote about some of the stuff we were doing at UCLA. I wrote about developing curriculum for students who were labeled “remedial.” I wrote about the kinds of political barriers that we ran into as we were trying to develop these courses, institutional political barriers. I was able to publish my dissertation, this cognitive analysis of writer's block. So, the fortunate thing was that I was able to write about the administrative, program, and curriculum work I was doing. This is the advice I would give to graduate students who end up taking jobs where they are running programs, or have some kind of administrative position, or are involved in teacher education. I often hear them say, “God, I have no time to do my own writing.” And what I always tell them is to write about what you're doing because often the “administrative work” we're doing has conceptual weight to it, it raises important issues about institutional politics, or ways we think about teaching and learning. I just think it's a shame to not turn your gaze right down to your feet, to where you're standing at the moment because often there's riches there to be written about, thought about, explored historically, theoretically, sociologically, or what not.

Because of the good fortune of being able to write while I was doing administrative work, and because I was lucky enough to win some awards for it, I built up a publishing record. And that record laid the groundwork for me to come onto the faculty here at the Department of Education.

So, to tie this all back to your original question, you can see that my whole academic life has been this kind of—I do not want to use the word “struggle,” that’s way too dramatic a word—but this, this blending or mixing of disciplines always in the search of trying to solve some problem, whether it’s a problem in curriculum or problem in the way we teach, or larger institutional problems. But my work always seems to be driven by some kind of event or experience that comes from the classroom, comes from teaching, comes from practice. Such work requires more than one discipline, almost by the nature of the problem. Sometimes I have to get a quick education in an area and find people who are experts in these disciplines who can act as my mentors and guides on particular projects.

TA: You enjoy writing and publishing and you did say that you ask your students to look at the jewels that are present at their feet and write about what they’re involved in. Where does this enthusiasm come from or what motivates you?

MR: That’s a really good question. You know, there’s times when the writing is a joy, but, more often, it’s not. It’s, it’s difficult, taxing, work that seems to slam me constantly up against my limitations. My limitations as a thinker, the limitations of my knowledge, the limitations of what I can do with language, all of my own insecurities. But writing for me is driven, in a way, because it’s a means that I have to try to explore and express, a means to explore something that bothers me, or something that I think is not right or wrong-headed. Writing is my toolkit to pursue those issues. If I were a lawyer, I would have the law and the courts. If I were a physician, I would probably be doing certain kinds of medicine in certain kinds of communities. But the toolkit that I have at my disposal is this ability to write, something I have developed over many, many, many years of practice.

When I was a young man, I wrote poetry, I had these fantasies of becoming a poet. Now, I was never a very good poet, but I think I learned a lot about the craft of writing by doing it, and then I carried that skill into my professional and academic writing. Caring about style, worrying about the sound of the language as well as what ideas the language is trying to convey. In fact, there’s not a separation between the sound of the language and the ideas it conveys. If I can hit the right pitch with the language then that advances the idea all the more. And conversely, if the ideas are shoddy, the idea isn’t carefully wrought, then the language is going to fall apart, for me, anyway.

I wish I could tell you that writing is pure pleasure, that I sit down at the desk at 8 in the morning, and the next thing I know it’s 5 in the evening, and I’ve had this blissful day lost in thought. But, no, it’s not at all like that. If somebody had a little camera on me, and they traced out the patterns of my writing day, there

would be dozens upon dozens of times when I'm getting up from the chair and going to the refrigerator, and getting up from the chair and going up for a walk, and getting up from the chair and trying desperately to think of anybody I can call.

TA: So, it is similar to what other people go through...

MR: It is...it is what many students who I've worked with go through. There's no difference. I guess I'm just committed to it. I know that if I stick at it long enough, something will come out of it. Plus, I have to say, over the years, I've been blessed enough to cultivate a large number of people who I can trust to give me honest feedback. I purposefully make sure I have a diversity of readers, people who come at the world in a different way from the way I do so that I can get all the feedback I can. If I'm writing about particular people like in the book *Possible Lives: The Promise of Public Education in America*, then, of course, they became part of the critical loop as well. I would send them the stuff I wrote and we would begin this exchange about the material, which then would lead to further discussion.

So that's my writing process. It's probably similar to a whole lot of the people who are gonna be reading this interview. It has its moments of pleasure and moments where the words do seem to come, but it has many more moments of just being stymied and going back to your books and trying to find the right train of thought, and getting up to get a snack, and waking up in the middle of night with an idea and scribbling on a notepad only to look at it in the morning and realize it's not such a great idea after all. That's just the way it is.

TA: What do you believe is the efficient way to train research apprentices/student researchers in understanding writing and becoming effective and prolific writers?

MR: We've created here in the department of Social Research Methodology these two writing classes, one for professional writing and one for people who want to write for broader audiences. So, I'm a firm believer that you really can learn a lot about how to do this work, do it better and do it with more grace. But, as I was just saying a moment ago, that doesn't guarantee that it's going to be easy or effortless, I mean I don't think any good performance is. There's no good performance in any domain that doesn't come without its cost, its pain and difficulty.

I think that young researchers, first of all, can put themselves in situations where they can learn more about the craft involved both in framing their research projects and writing about them. They can do that through courses. And they can

do that through aligning themselves with a very good editor who's not just going to edit for them but teach them as well. They also can go out of their way to find those other people, their peers or mentors, who respond well to their writing and form relationships with them where they read each other's writing.

I'm also a firm believer in reading good stuff. When you find authors who write well in your discipline or people who just write well, a favorite novelist, read them and read them like a writer, rather than reading them like a reader. In other words, read them with an eye to figuring out what it is they do that makes their writing work so well. You read them analytically, you read them with an eye to stealing a trick or two. So I think there are a lot of things that students can do to help themselves become better writers.

And also, as I was talking about earlier, remember that writing is hard for everybody, I do think sometimes that students carry in their minds the assumption that for other people composing is an effortless enterprise, this effortless activity, when, in fact, it is difficult for everybody. I think just even understanding that up front keeps you at the keyboard rather than allowing yourself to give into the feeling of inadequacy, thinking that it's only you who are going through this awful stuff. It's more the norm than you think.

TA: What do you believe is an effective mechanism "to bridge," what you've talked about, "the significant rhetorical and political gap between disciplinary inquiry and the public conversation about educational issues"?

MR: Well, a lot of people have talked about that. The Spencer Foundation, for example, is quite concerned about it. If you are asking me what I think we could do to try to bridge that gap, I again go back to writing. You cannot believe what a bad rap academics in general and education types in particular have about their writing. It's so easy to dismiss them. I remember when I completed *Lives on the Boundary*, which was my first trade book, and I had to get an agent to help me place it, because I kept sending it off to publishers and it kept getting rejected. I remember this agent got back to me, and finally he found someone who was interested in the idea of the book. I think he said something to her to the effect of "Oh, he's an academic and he studies writing." And her response was, "Yeah but can he write?" The automatic assumption was, if I was an academic, I could not write.

So I think, simply, one thing we can do is to understand that we need to be good at writing for multiple audiences. So that when the opportunity arises to produce an education opinion piece or a letter to the editor, we need to be able to do that and do it with grace. That's just one little thing. I mean I know there's much more

involved in the policy and political process, but you're asking what I personally thought could be done. Working on the way we communicate certainly is one thing. There are lots of other researchers who are more directly involved in the policy process, but I think my little contribution would be think hard about how we come across in print...and to get better at doing it.

TA: You study the everyday intelligence of working-class people. Do you earn some flak on the academic level?

MR: Actually, just the opposite. I wasn't sure how *The Mind at Work* was going to be received in the various academic disciplines. Of course, I was most worried about the cognitive science types because I use a cognitive psychological framework to look at the cognition involved in blue-collar and service jobs. The cognitive analysis is then embedded in a broader political and sociological analysis of work, intelligence, and social class, but still I use cognitive psychology as a fundamental tool. I did send some of it in draft, as I said I do to people like Rich Shavelson, my old mentor, just to try to get a reality check. What pleases me is that the book has been surprisingly well received in a lot of academic circles, including with the cognitive science folks. So I've been very pleased with the reception, very pleased.

TA: Change and goals for the future?

MR: What am I currently working on? Two things. I'm writing a lot of opinion pieces and commentaries in line with my new book, *Why School?: Reclaiming Education for All of Us*. When a book comes out, it provides an occasion, a "platform" in media-speak, to reach a broader public through radio or television interviews and through short essays in newspapers and magazines, both print and online. So I've been writing a lot on current education policy—for example, on NCLB and Race to the Top—and on the broader questions of the purpose of schooling in a democracy. That theme is at the core of *Why School?*

I'm also returning to an early topic in my research and writing, basic skills instruction at the post-secondary level. I'm just beginning this work, and I'm excited about it. The nation seems to have suddenly become aware of the issue and a lot of attention is being paid to that broad population of people in their late teens into their 20s who have not done well in school, don't have a promising occupational path in front of them, and whose numeracy and literacy skills do not prepare them for further schooling or a decent job. I've long been interested in this population and look forward to new work with them.

TA: Thank you Mike. I appreciate your time, effort and energy spent on this interview.

References

- Rose, M. (1989). *Lives on the boundary: A moving account of the struggles and achievements of America's educationally underprepared*. New York: Free Press (paperback).
- Rose, M. (1995). *Possible lives: The promise of public education in America*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.
- Rose, M. (2005). *The mind at work: Valuing the intelligence of the American worker*. New York: Penguin (paperback).
- Rose, M. (2009). *Why school?: Reclaiming education for all of us*. New York: The New Press (hardcover).