

TABOO TOPICS AND THE RHETORIC OF SILENCE: DISCUSSING LIVES ON THE BOUNDARY IN A BASIC WRITING CLASS

ABSTRACT: *This article considers the rhetorical implications of silence as a contestatory strategy in a basic writing class where Mike Rose's *Lives on the Boundary* was the course text. Though the students were successfully reading and writing about complicated topics, they were reluctant to critique educational processes and institutions or to discuss the issues of power raised in Rose's book. Students' silence may be read as evidence of complex cultural and educational conflicts operating discursively and materially in some writing classrooms. Using remarks from correspondence with Professor Rose, the article concludes with a recommendation for re-imagining a sensitized approach to critical pedagogy.*

Among the many challenges to the field of composition, the basic writing classroom remains a site of political and educational conflict. With shrinking budgets and new priorities, many universities are withdrawing their commitment to developmental education and focusing their resources exclusively on courses "worthy" of academic credit. Given this point of view, freshmen who place into today's basic writing courses are potentially more marginalized and silenced than the students who preceded them. With a goal of empowerment, most developmental writing programs try to prepare students for the increasing demands of a college education while encouraging them to think critically about language, literacy, and the way that they are positioned within the institutional setting. Ironically, however, our basic writers may be disinclined to enter the conversation of critique or to engage in discussions of institutional power relations. I would like to suggest that we take seriously students' silence on these topics and that we read their silence as a rhetorical act of resistance.

My argument derives from my experiences teaching four sections of basic writing at a branch campus of Penn State University. In the

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discussion that follows, I describe in some detail the expansive and fruitful conversation that accompanied my students' reading of Mike Rose's *Lives on the Boundary*, the course's central text. Then I turn to their silent refusal to engage with me in educational or cultural criticism. I suggest alternative "readings" of their silence and explore the implications of their response, as evidence of ideological conflicts operating discursively and materially within writing classrooms where radical critique is practiced. Finally, I draw from Rose's work to consider how a sensitized critical pedagogy might be imagined.

Lives on the Boundary in a Basic Writing Course

Beyond instruction in basic skills, the course was framed by three additional goals. First, I wanted to teach basic writing as serious academic activity, by asking students to grapple with what was for them a difficult and demanding text. I also wanted to teach literacy skills within a framework in which the students' identities and personal experiences could be foregrounded without encouraging confessional discourse. Finally, I wanted to provide for my students a medium through which they might examine and critique educational practices and institutions, as these directly affected their own "boundaried" lives. For these reasons, I chose *Lives on the Boundary* as the course text.

By means of narrative, autobiography and vignette, *Lives on the Boundary* creates a richly textured argument for the educational potentiality of all students. It traces out Rose's own educational encounters as the child of immigrants in a Los Angeles ghetto, as an "outsider" college student, and ultimately as a university writing instructor. Using examples from his school days and from the students he came to tutor and teach, Rose explores the terminology of failure implicit in labels like "remedial" and "deficient" and exposes many of the hidden assumptions relating to class, culture, and student potential that perpetuate this failure in American classrooms. *Lives on the Boundary* is, in John Trimbur's words,

a story worth telling, especially at a moment in our collective history when "reform" movements in education are calling for higher standards, national testing, teacher accountability, discipline and a return to a canonical curriculum. It is a story to break the prevailing silence in public discourse about education by speaking of democratic aspirations to increase access, to open opportunity, and to remove educational barriers to the poor and working class. (42)

Writing in the first person, Rose subverts traditional political and cultural associations relating to personal achievement to insist that the narrative of an individual's life is both the product and process of sur-

rounding social and educational narratives.

My course design was influenced largely by theorists like David Bartholomae, Patricia Bizzell, and Mike Rose himself, who have shown that, given appropriate guidance, inexperienced writers are quite capable of handling the challenging reading and writing assignments that are part and parcel of any authentic preparation for actual college writing. In addition, I was motivated by a change in the configuration of my writing classes that prompted me to re-evaluate my formerly expressivist approach to basic writing instruction. For much of the fifteen years that I had taught basic writing at a branch campus of Penn State University, my students fit the description of "true" basic writers: either returning adults who needed a semester to remember what college writing was about or traditional students who had experienced difficulty in English in the lower grades or who had little instruction in composition. The cultural configuration of my basic writing classes was reflective of the racial and economic composition of the campus: the students were largely from working and middle class communities; more than three-quarters of the eighty basic writing students I taught that semester were white, sixteen students were African-American, three were Hispanic.

Over the years, however, my basic writing population had begun to change, not in its sociological makeup but in its educational vantage point. In addition to the students I just described, I was seeing a large number of students (both African-American and white) who had, in fact, been successful in high school, students who thought of themselves as "good" students and "good" writers, students who had been rewarded for following required formulas and prescriptions. I wanted a course that would challenge, through intellectually rigorous reading, discussion, and writing, the complacency that these students' talk and writing often revealed. But I also chose Rose's text because I felt that it would strike a chord in those "traditional" basic writers, who might identify with Rose's high school and early college days, since the vocational curriculum of Rose's experience translates directly to the lower academic tracks of many public high schools today.

And so we read and talked and wrote about academic struggles and literacy "moments," educational bureaucracies, tracking and labeling, barriers and entrance to the academic "conversation," the perplexities of choosing a major, and the problems of students with various special needs. We read each chapter separately, discussing highlights of the reading in groups and writing essays on each of the chapters. In their papers, I encouraged students to reflect on their own experiences as well as to engage more broadly the issues that the text evoked, which involved citing Rose and examining *Lives on the Boundary* as a critical source.

Reading and Writing about Boundaried Lives

I was quite amazed at what the students were able to do with the assignments — given their limited reading experience and the difficulty of the text. And I was impressed by their forays into the complexities and contradictions of the cultural arena. For example, in one paper, Brian, a student from the working class Frankford section of Philadelphia, chose a passage from Rose's chapter on "The Politics of Remediation" in which Rose discusses, among other things, the alienation and loneliness of the freshman experience: "The huge lecture halls, the distance from the professor, the streams of students you don't know" (*Lives* 174). Rose explains that for some students this alienation is compounded by the realization that, after years of preparation, they are simply inadequate to the task. Brian focuses on a quotation from this section: "But a much deeper sense of isolation comes if the loneliness you feel is rooted in the books and lectures that surround you, in the very language of the place" (*Lives* 174), explaining that

the terms "books and lectures" are not limited to the school environment, but may also include home, work, and everywhere else in society. The "books" may be newspapers or signs and the "lectures" may include television and radio programs. The two terms may be used for any situation in society where reading or listening is necessary. The "language" that the quote refers to can be substituted with "the culture or beliefs" of an environment in which you isolate yourself.

In order to explain, Brian refers us to an earlier chapter in *Lives*. He writes,

Mike Rose felt separated and isolated in his transfer from high school to college. Most of the people in his college classes came from and lived in a world very different from Rose's. The majority of the students attending Loyola were from the upper-middle class and he came from the lower social class of South Vermont [Avenue]. The cultures of the two were as far apart as day and night. This difference between Rose and the other students caused him to fortify himself with barriers. He did not join any social or academic clubs because he felt they seemed "exclusive and a little strange" (43). Rose also did not go to see teachers at their offices because he had this idea in his head that he was stupid. Mike Rose was surrounded by

"books and lectures" with a language very different from his own and this forced him to isolate himself from students and teachers at Loyola.

Brian goes on to apply the quotation to his own experience as a new student at Penn State who "felt inferior to others and just not cut out for college. . . . As my test scores lowered, my fear of asking for help grew. I was just unable to grasp the 'language' of college," and he likens his difficulties to those of his neighbor, Neila, a Russian immigrant, who, because of her limited English skills, could not work as a nurse, the field for which she had been trained, and worked instead in "a sweat shop for long hours and low wages." Brian concludes:

Isolation is common in our society and we see it everywhere we go. There are men sleeping on grates down town, the immigrants that come to our country, and the college students that are unfamiliar with the college atmosphere. Everybody, at one time or another, feels isolated because they are unfamiliar with the culture, language, backgrounds or anything else that can be used as a barrier.

As he struggles to make sense of the literature, Brian suddenly recognizes the relevance of Rose's narrative to issues within and beyond the school setting. His essay illustrates the level of possibility for students who themselves are labeled and placed in basic writing classes — classes where despite the years of research in composition studies, quite often students spend a semester writing paragraphs describing their bedrooms, where the grade for the course depends more on whether they have overcome comma splices than whether they can use writing to interpret, to analyze, and to create meaning.

Silence as a Rhetorical Act

In recent years, many of us in composition have moved to what might be called a cultural studies perspective — we have seen the ways in which language is complicit in the maintenance of many unjust social structures, and we have tried to bring that understanding to our students as we teach them about the power and powerlessness of writing. This means that we show students how to question what they heretofore have taken for granted and to see that there are no simple or uncomplicated answers. This was indeed my third goal in using *Lives on the Boundary*, and it was here that my efforts were resisted.

Throughout his text, Rose describes individuals who are failed by the system. The examples themselves are detailed and colorful,

and the characters were very real for my students. But Rose intends the images as representative examples, and his book continually exploits the personal in order to accomplish serious cultural work. While *Lives on the Boundary* offers hope on the local scale, it raises serious questions about the ways American education is handled, about the complex, imbricated collaborations of racism, classism, and ethnocentrism that allow for the creation of what Rose terms an "educational underclass." My students, however, were unwilling to investigate or accept the complicity of the system itself: education offered hurdles, they contended, but individuals with true grit, determination, and resourcefulness could overcome obstacles, not only to succeed academically but to succeed in life. Their reading of *Lives on the Boundary* confirmed John Trimbur's fear that some students would interpret the book superficially as "another comforting American success story of an individual who, through the power of education and the guidance of more experienced teacher-mentors, takes the predictable road to self-improvement and upward mobility" (35).

Throughout the semester, the students continually countered my attempts at critique by recasting their interpretations in a rosy glow of individual success. When I pointed out the ways that schools encouraged mediocrity and self-defeat, they pointed out that Rose had escaped, by way of his mentor, senior English teacher Jack McFarland, and repeatedly brought to my attention the fact that Rose was "saving" others. It is telling that in his introduction, Brian defines alienating language as "'the culture or beliefs' of an environment *in which you isolate yourself*." Brian is unwilling to go beyond personal will or inclination to address the problem of isolation as a failure of the system rather than a failure of the individual. "Unable to grasp the language of college," he writes, "this separation was moving me toward failing out of college. Luckily, from the help of one of my good friends, who had already overcome this change, I was able to understand the 'books and lectures' that surrounded me." For Brian, as for most of my students, it was, finally, the efforts of individuals, not class or economic configurations, that were culpable.

Over the semester, the students' resistance to critique actually increased. So it was most apparent when we reflected on the final chapter of *Lives*. Here, Rose asserts that in order to create more effective learning institutions, we teachers will need, among other things, "a pedagogy that encourages us to step back and consider the threat of the standard classroom and that shows us, having stepped back, how to step forward to invite a student across the boundaries of that powerful room" (238). I remember this discussion quite clearly because — well, it wasn't a discussion at all — it was, instead, agonizing minutes of perplexed silence — in four sections of basic writing, that's all there was, perplexed silence. Every teacher knows that almost palpable si-

lence in a classroom: the downcast eyes, the furious turning of textbook pages. Sometimes it signals unpreparedness; this time I think that it signaled profound discomfort.

As I urged conversation, providing scenarios from the text and from my own educational experiences, my students allowed (though many of them for the first time) that power in a classroom was tipped in favor of the teacher. However, they could not understand why I would want to point that out. Although the students themselves had experienced power plays throughout their educational lives and could relate them to the various scenarios in *Rose*, they could not accept *my* willingness to criticize the very institution I represented, and they seemed unwilling to support me in this effort. Leaving class that day, one student waited to ask me, "Can you do that?" and he wondered aloud if I might not find myself "in trouble" for being so "negative" about education.

The students' reactions, their silence, suspicion, embarrassment, and resistance, got me thinking about my role—all of our roles—in teaching composition. It was possible that my students did not really identify with *Rose* in the way that I'd hoped. That is, although many had been ill-prepared for higher education, they did not recognize themselves as members of the same socioeconomic class (or recipients of the same educational exclusions) as the students in *Rose's* examples. Bridget Murphy and Roberta Pierce Trooien found this to be true when they studied their white, male students' resistance to multicultural literature, which the students termed "victim stories." In "Rumblings from the Back Row," they show that their white, male students, including those from working class families, had an inflated conception of their own socioeconomic class. The authors point out that because these students cherished the American Dream of economic success, in order "to nourish their dreams" of making it, they "identif[ied] upward" (300) and thus could see the characters in the literature they were reading only as Other.

I thought back to earlier in the semester when we had talked about "I Just Wanna Be Average," the chapter of *Lives on the Boundary* my students had most enjoyed. During that class discussion, they had ardently agreed with *Rose* that low-level tracking systematically exhausts both the mind and the spirit, and they shared "horror stories" about low-tracked high school classmates. For many, their own academic lives were painted vividly in the pages of the text, yet they read the vo-tech students' assertion, "I just wanna be average," not as a declaration of frustration and bitterness, but as a "stretch" or "step up" for remedial students, and certainly not an aspiration they would share. If many of my students had been labeled as the "losers" in high school because their schools lacked the services they needed or because the services they received diminished their own sense of self-

worth or because the school's entire system of academic support was founded on expectations about culture and race, all that was now behind them. College was the "blank slate"; success required an optimistic, uncritical outlook.

In this way, too, my basic writers seemed to parallel Rose's student Christine, who found it "rude" to write about the hardships and prejudices her relatives faced as Hispanic immigrants in Southern California. As Rose explains, in order to move on, the painful and ugly must be left behind—certainly not written about or discussed out loud in a composition classroom (178-9). My student, Felicia, begins her criticism of tracking in her high school in this way:

[If] one tries to achieve something, for example, going to college[,] and continues to have many problems in college [,] that may lead to a dropout. Only that one [person] who continues to go along with their plans, no matter how hard it may get, will achieve their goals and [gain?] even more of what they expected to achieve.

Felicia writes that obstacles are a part of life, that college is going to be very hard, but that "you must deal with the problem as a whole and never give up your goal because it can and will be achieved." Like most of her classmates, Felicia looks forward to a "happy ending," so issues of power or revolutionary politics are either taboo or beside the point.

Is it then possible to understand the students' silence in the light of Richard Ohmann's observation that many of today's students come to college "to gain social advantage, not to defect; to elaborate their individuality, not discard it; to learn the ropes, not to see who's at the other end" (329)? Certainly for most of the students whom I teach, college appears to them as the single route to economic security and upward mobility. It would seem strange that I would sit in my privileged position (white, English professor with apparent job security) and ask them (dare them) to critique it. How could they get inside that and how would they read my motives? We must "take account," cautions Donald Lazere, "of the anomaly involved in the advocacy of revolutionary politics . . . to working class students desperate to get jobs" (12). Lazere further points out that

[A]cademic radicals almost inevitably must appear to be denigrating the value of their own cultural codes . . . —codes which *they* can afford to take for granted—in the eyes of students . . . for whom these codes are far less accessible. For such students . . . , radical teachers' belittling of [these codes] . . . is bound again not only to appear as patronizing but, in effect,

as a denial of access to the radical possibilities in academic culture. (16)

In the end, I believe these observations are crucial. Many of my students were the first in their families to go to college. On the opening course survey, almost universally, they indicated that their primary reason for pursuing a college education was "to get a good job." About halfway through the semester, I had asked my classes to free write on this question: "At this point in your life, is there something you'd rather be working at rather than going to school? What benefits or advantages would that option hold for you at this moment?" Repeatedly the students argued, in various ways, that such an exercise had no real purpose. Clearly, they contended, if they wanted to "get ahead," they needed to continue in college, regardless of their own desires. Their passionate commitment to higher education supports Ohmann's and Lazere's observations: asking students to critique, rather than teaching them ways to negotiate, the institutions that they identify as resources for securing upward mobility may seem to them both hypocritical and cruel.

But What is the Alternative?

In a recent article in *College English*, Jeff Smith argues that students actually desire skills instruction, not critical consciousness, and that writing teachers should abandon their misguided efforts to promote democratic social relations within and outside of higher education and simply provide students with what they want: linguistic formulas for entrepreneurial success. While we instructors are not obligated to service corporate society by producing particular kinds of workers, Smith asserts, "we *are* ethically bound by students' own aims, even if those aims seem uncomfortably close to elite values" (317; for a more nuanced discussion of skills instruction, see Lisa Delpit). According to Smith, students passively resist the radical efforts of their writing teachers; their silence reflects either their ability to "play along" with classroom authority or their relief that composition will be less rigorous than their "relevant," career-directed courses. Smith would thus read my students' confusion and discomfort in discussing issues of institutional power as evidence that another agenda might be more appropriate for the composition classroom.

It is true, as Smith indicates, that most students "seek not to resist but to *join* an elite [class]" (304), and it is also true that, as Rose points out, "[g]overnment and business concern about the preparation of the work force is not, of necessity, crass or malevolent, and the hope for a

better material life for one's children has throughout this century driven participation in our nation's public educational experiment" (*Possible Lives* 430). But it would be irresponsible of me to teach basic writing as if it were *only* about learning the rules of formal English. For all instruction in language has political and ethical implications. If I am to teach students about language and power (for success in the work place or anywhere else), I must emphasize the power of language to both maintain and interrogate injustice and inequality. Phyllis Mentzell Ryder succinctly recounts the intersection of ideology and language in her (not unrelated) response to Denise David, Barbara Gordon, and Rita Pollard's proposal for uniform disciplinary principles or "guiding assumptions" for freshman writing programs based exclusively on student writing and discussions about writing:

For scholars who see language as always already imbued with multiple social and institutional forces—who see words as Burkean "terministic screens" that focus our attention and therefore exclude other perceptions, and who see larger ideological screens that limit our interpretations of what we "see"—any in-depth class discussion about "writing" blends together social, linguistic, and political analysis as well. (601)

To a teacher of rhetoric, this is not a trivial obligation.

In an urgent plea to educators to challenge popular representations bent on demonizing youth and especially youth of color, Henry Giroux calls upon "academics and cultural workers" to "redefine the connection between their roles as public intellectuals and their responsibility to address the major social problems facing young people today," in part by "redefin[ing] the purpose of public and higher education not as a servant of the state nor to meet the demands of commerce and the marketplace but as a repository for educating students and others in the democratic discourse of freedom, social responsibility, and public leadership" (194-5). Our responsibility as critical educators emerges, not because we presuppose that we should or can "save [our students] from themselves" (430), as Kurt Spellmeyer seems to suggest, but because education always entails the introduction of the new, the unfamiliar, and often the disturbing. "[A] defining characteristic of good teaching," Rose asserts more than once in *Possible Lives*, "is a tendency to push on the existing order of things" (428).

Taking Giroux's admonition seriously, I cannot simply accept my students' willingness to make power (or race or gender) a taboo topic for classroom discussion, for to do so is to "silence education for citizenship" (195). Their silence needs a way of being spoken. On the other hand, as Rose cautions, I must teach "in ways that do not diminish the tremendous agency [these] students . . . exhibit—they're here

struggling to master the system—" and their desire to master it must likewise be respected and addressed sensitively (Rose letter).

Imagining the Possibilities

In Rose's view, these complex, contradictory issues may be best explored through creativity and imagination. "Sometimes when head on social critique fails," he writes, "imagination and 'thought experiments' developed out of personal and school experience might work." We can begin, he suggests, by asking students "to try to find the local, immediate, familiar moment of injustice and gently urge a looking outward from it" (Rose letter). We can call to their attention the discourses that perpetuate values and institutions of injustice and inequality, but we can also help them to re-imagine and re-articulate the terms of justice and equality. In my basic writing class, for example, such an approach might have offered an alternate discourse to address the conflicts articulated by my students' silence. In an effort to imagine the kind of creative alternative Rose seems to have in mind, I will conclude by turning to an essay written by one of my basic writing students.

Toward the end of the semester, our class discussion had focused on the closing paragraph in Chapter 8 of Rose's text, entitled "Crossing Boundaries." Here, Rose calls for a epistemological reorientation in American education. In class, we had divided the passage up and examined separately each of the conceptual commitments Rose asserts will be needed to provide a truly democratic system of education. For their last paper, I asked the students to consider one of these commitments and to shape their analyses around that issue. Kara explains her topic in her opening paragraph:

In his book, *Lives on the Boundary*, Mike Rose says that to have any prayer of accomplishing educational excellence, we will need several "conceptual blessings." One, he said, would be "a perspective on failure that lays open the logic of error" [238]. Here Rose is trying to say that students make mistakes for good reasons, and that failure is a starting point and not necessarily a failure. Also, students need to be encouraged to learn and not be instantly judged as failures. What Rose means is that teachers need to be in touch with students ways, and seek out their reasoning of error.

While many of my students read Rose's statement as confirmation that "we learn from our mistakes," Kara saw the subtle difference:

that it was the educational system that marked students as failures, not because they couldn't learn from their mistakes but because there was a prior responsibility on the part of teachers and programs to allow for errors, to analyze errors, and to recognize errors as logical (and intelligent) attempts to solve particular problems. Kara uses several examples from *Lives* to illustrate the need for a renovated perspective on failure, and in her closing paragraph she calls for "more one-to-one, teacher-to-student discussions on reasoning." Kara, it should be noted, went further than many of the students, who were stuck in the abyss of individual culpability. But rather than closing down the analysis at the point where Kara has begun to understand the critical problem, Rose suggests, I might have pressed her (and the class) to consider productive alternatives: "What would have to happen to make the response to error . . . more fruitful and generous? And what assumptions about people and society would have to change to make this possible?" (Rose letter). Such questions are, to use Giroux's term, "performative" in that they "affirm the critical but refuse the cynical, establish hope as central to political practice but eschew a romantic utopianism" (199).

Imagining the possibilities requires creativity on the part of teachers as well as their students. In *Possible Lives*, Rose models this critical approach as he describes successful teachers throughout the country. As a participant-observer, he vividly captures local classroom scenes and effective classroom teachers in an effort to

generate a hopeful vision in a time of bitterness and lost faith, and . . . to do that in a way that holds simultaneously to what educational philosopher David Purpel calls the "interlocking and interdependent hinges" of criticism and creativity. . . . [T]o sharpen awareness of injustice and incompetence, . . . to maintain the skeptic's acuity, yet nurture the ability to imagine the possible and act from hope. (412)

Rose's work is always mindful of the complexity of educational processes—indeed of all social processes—which make them difficult to assess and correct. Nevertheless, he insists, citing Maxine Greene, that a "'consciousness of possibility,' an ability to imagine a better state of things" is the mark of the best teachers he has observed (428).

Our imaginative creativity must likewise sensitize us to the conflicting messages our students receive about the "value" of a college education. The students I meet in basic writing courses tell me repeatedly that they "want to succeed," although often they are not quite sure how this success is defined or accomplished. So it is not surprising that they should resist my efforts to raise questions about institutional power. Demonstrating that mastery of the system and individual

effort will not guarantee economic security confounds students' motives for attending (and paying for) college and, in itself, offers no alternatives for action. If we want to disrupt silence or complacency, we must respect the legitimacy of their concerns and, at the same time, encourage them imagine alternatives.

In *The Power of Silence*, Adam Jaworski makes an important contribution to linguistic research by showing that silence is not simply the absence of speech; rather it functions as communicative act with definite rhetorical power. In the case of my basic writing students, silence was a means of protest as well as an expression of perplexity and confusion. Their silence charges me to address their resistance creatively and sensitively, to acknowledge and to help them to voice the conflicts and contradictions in our respective classroom goals. "To imagine a vibrant democratic state," writes Rose, "you must have a deep belief in the majesty of common intelligence, in its distribution through the population, and in the resultant ability of the population to become participatory civic beings" (*Possible Lives* 432). Our students' silence can be a powerful reminder to those of us who are invested in language, in discourse, in the exchange of ideas: if we read silence as absence or apathy, we will miss the complex cultural messages and contradictions in that silence and fail to recognize the many ways that silence speaks.

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