

# TEACHING CREATIVITY AND CURIOSITY

On Teaching Writing with *Habits of the Creative Mind*

On Evaluating Student Writing

Creativity at Work: Mike Rose

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In these days of high-stakes testing, documentable learning goals, and performance-based salary increases, the admonition to teach creativity and curiosity may seem at odds with the spirit of the times. We have developed this pedagogical approach, however, precisely because we feel it is essential, given the times in which we live, that all of us—teachers, students, and administrators alike—cultivate habits of mind that promote flexibility, imaginative solutions, and innovation.

Is there a formula for teaching creativity and curiosity? No, there's no formula, but there are at least two necessary preconditions. You must make a habit of practicing creativity and curiosity both in your teaching and in your own reading and writing. Assuming that these two preconditions are met, we can discuss various ways that this book can be of use to you and your students. Teaching *Habits of the Creative Mind* will change some of the dynamics in your class, but it won't change essential aspects of writing instruction: teaching well will remain time intensive; students' work will still need to be evaluated (also a time-intensive responsibility); and students' improvement will continue to take time. But while these constants will remain, what you do during your time with the students and how you discuss and evaluate their writing will change in ways that we believe both you and your students will find rewarding.

## On Teaching Writing with *Habits of the Creative Mind*

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We've written *Habits of the Creative Mind* because we value writing as a technology humans have created to make thought visible. We recognize that a student who learns to write well will always have at hand a set of tools for thinking and learning as well as for communicating. What we most want for our students is for reading and writing to open up new possibilities for education and growth, so they can think new thoughts and see the world in new ways.

We know our goals are ambitious, and we recognize the appeal of an easier path—teaching students to write formulaic arguments and to master grammar drills gets them to produce writing that looks polished and correct. Concentrating on argumentation and the elimination of error helps steer beginning writers away from confusion and clutter. While we value well-written sentences and well-organized arguments, we just haven't found that making these matters the highest priority in the classroom gives students the opportunity to learn larger lessons about why writing matters, what it's useful for, or what it can do. And without those lessons, students miss out on having direct and repeated experiences discovering something new and important through their own writing, reading, and research.

We have come to see the focus on formal correctness in writing instruction as a way to avoid the fundamentally disorderly and inefficient process of thinking new thoughts—as a way, in other words, to avoid the very essence of education. So the first challenge we face when we enter the classroom is helping our students to see that, if they are going to use writing to learn, they have to unlearn ways of writing and of thinking about writing that emphasize form over content. To do this, we developed the approach we've presented here, an approach that is designed to help students practice the habits of mind that make real learning possible—paying attention, asking questions, and embracing complexity. Once we started getting our students to practice these activities, immediately everything got messy. Our students knew how to write papers that looked tidy, but they didn't know how to focus, or how to ask a good question, or how to get an informational question to lead to a foundational question. When they tried, there was no sudden, miraculous transformation, no great thoughts hidden from view that were just waiting to be invited out into the open—not because they weren't good students, but because that's not how thought happens (unless you're Zeus).

One learns to think, to focus, to be curious, to be creative, to ask genuine questions, to tolerate states of unknowing not in a flash but with regular, steady, deliberate practice. In our classes, students practice questioning their own patterns of reading, writing, looking,

thinking, and learning. And they practice formulating genuine questions—big questions, unanswerable questions, questions they feel drawn to or haunted by. When they succeed in formulating such questions, they experience the charge of intrinsic motivation—that moment when the assignment shifts from being something imposed by circumstance to being an opportunity to dwell on something of felt importance. In such a space, the call to practice being curious and creative is an invitation to experience what it means to be inspired, what it means to be thoughtful, what it means to use writing to think thoughts that are new to the writer.

The way we see it, the biggest challenge to using *this* book to teach writing is that we start with the assumption that thinking is a messy business and that writing, which is best used as a technology for thinking new thoughts, is also a messy business. This messiness *never* goes away, because thinking new thoughts inevitably involves a profound encounter with the unknown. Teachers who wish to teach writing in a way that gives students access to their creative potential in all its unruliness need a philosophy of consciousness.

We composed *Habits of the Creative Mind* so that its design expresses our philosophy of consciousness. We've provided you with nearly forty reflective essays to trigger occasions to practice the habits of being attentive, curious, and creative. We hope that you will create your own itinerary through these materials and supplement them as you see fit. Because we know there is not *one* writing process, we have not imagined an ideal linear path that leads from mundane mumblings to creative arias in fifteen weeks. We provide exercises that are designed to get the students to practice ways of thinking that may be unfamiliar to them, so the initial results are likely to be muddled. And because the intent of the exercises is to get the students to move into unfamiliar territory, that disorder won't suddenly disappear. What happens, rather, with practice, is the development of individual writing strategies for encouraging an encounter with the unfamiliar.

We'd like to imagine that putting this pedagogy in a textbook will transform educational environments and students' experiences with writing, but the truth is that this book, like all books, can only be brought to life by its readers. We wrote *Habits of the Creative Mind* for an audience of creative teachers who want to better serve their students. Our sincere hope is that our book will act as a catalyst for invention, innovation, and writing—for you and your students. We're eager to find out what you create with the material we've put between two covers.

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If you sign on to teach with *Habits of the Creative Mind*, then you're likely to have additional questions about the specific choices we've made. So we've provided answers here to the most frequently asked questions we get from teachers who are considering adopting our book.

**CAN YOU GIVE EXAMPLES OF HOW THE MATERIAL IN *HABITS OF THE CREATIVE MIND* HAS BEEN USED WITH FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS?**

We've said that inventive teachers can begin anywhere in *Habits of the Creative Mind*. But because we know some of you want guidance in thinking about course design and about how to work with *Habits of the Creative Mind* within the confines of an existing curriculum, we offer an account of how one of us (Ann) successfully used material from *Habits of the Creative Mind* to teach first-year writing in a program where the course structure, pedagogy, reader, and grading standards were uniform across sections. To comply with program requirements, each student had to produce five drafts and five argumentative essays; in each essay students were asked to make connections between two or more readings from the required textbook. Even in such a tightly scheduled course, every week Ann was able to integrate material from an essay in *Habits of the Creative Mind*. The sustained attention to habits of mind reinforced students' understanding that what they were learning about how to think new thoughts would continue to matter long after the semester was over.

At the beginning of the term, Ann discussed the problem of writing by formula and the idea of unlearning past lessons about writing; both topics are addressed in the "Beginning" section of the book. As students wrote their first essays, Ann introduced exercises from "On Learning to See" to give them early practice with sustained focus. Then, as they revised that first essay, Ann discussed "On the Three Most Important Words in the English Language." By the time students were working on their second essay, Ann had introduced material from "On Asking Questions" and "On Reading as a Writer" to hone their skills as curious and attentive readers. Because so few students knew how to create good conditions for writing, Ann had them consider "On Creative Places" so that they could confront the myth that they can successfully multitask and could contemplate how workspaces can create or disrupt the conditions for focused attention.

By mid-semester, drawing on the lesson from "On Writing to a Question," Ann encouraged students to forego a thesis statement in their first draft and instead explore connections and tensions among the assigned readings in the required textbook. For the final paragraph of the draft, Ann asked the students to pose a genuine question that was

raised by their work in the previous paragraphs. Students then rewrote their essays to answer the question they'd posed. To support such substantial revision, Ann discussed the strategies covered in the essay "On Revising." (If there had been more time, she would have assigned the "On Motivation" essay, which describes author Jill Lepore's struggle to ask the right question about her research and to rethink and revise her project.)

In the final third of the semester, Ann wove "On Joining the Conversation," "On Argument as Journey," and "On Structure" into the students' work with the required textbook to provide them with additional practice working with sources, building arguments, and organizing essays. She could just as well have taken another path in the remainder of the term. If she'd worked with the essays in the "Reflecting" section, she would have had her students practice paying attention to their ways of reading, writing, and thinking so that they could think about how to transfer what they were learning to future writing. Or if she had worked with the essays in the "Diverging" section, she would have had her students practice breaking from fixed ways of thinking and writing by encouraging them to be playful with received ideas and conventions. Ann chose the path she did in response to the needs of her particular group of students, as evidenced by their drafting and revising habits and their ways of participating in discussions of the assigned readings. For a different set of students, she'd have taken a different route, but regardless of the sequence of essays she chose, the goal would have remained the same — to foster habits that keep students questioning and learning as writers, readers, and thinkers.

Composition courses that include research writing can also make use of essays such as "On Going Down the Rabbit Hole," which invites students to see research as an adventure, and "On Joining the Conversation," which helps students figure out how to navigate an ongoing academic conversation. The essays "On Confronting the Unknown" and "On Encountering Difficulty" challenge students to follow unfamiliar paths to unpredictable ends, while "On Creative Reading" and "On Making Thought Visible" both describe and model research practices. For students who are working with scholarly secondary sources, "On Curiosity at Work in the Academy" explains how academic writers in a range of fields let their curiosity shape their intellectual projects. Together, these essays challenge the assumption that doing research is about finding sources that support what you already think. Instead, they show students that research begins in doubt and uncertainty; that it advances only through the time-consuming process of learning about context; and that it is realized in the creation of an essay that reveals the writer's own mind at work on a problem.

**CAN *HABITS OF THE CREATIVE MIND* BE USED IN COURSES OTHER THAN  
FIRST-YEAR COMPOSITION?**

Yes. We've used material from this book to teach introductory and advanced literature classes, writing seminars about creative nonfiction and senior theses, classes in a doctoral program in social work, and seminars for dissertation writers. In these courses students have produced everything from traditional academic writing to research-based multimedia essays.

We'd venture to say, in fact, that we see the habits of creative and curious minds as the foundation of a liberal education. When students practice curiosity and creativity as they read, research, write, and revise, they learn how to learn and how to pay attention to both the drama of the world and the theater of their own minds.

**IS *HABITS OF THE CREATIVE MIND* APPROPRIATE FOR STUDENTS WHO HAVEN'T YET MASTERED  
THE STRUCTURE OF SENTENCES AND PARAGRAPHS?**

We firmly believe that the approach to writing we take in this book will work with any student whose sights are set on postsecondary education. Between the two of us, we've taught students in public high schools, community colleges, and public and elite research universities, so we're familiar with a wide range of student writers. In our decades of teaching, we've discovered a few things these students have in common. Most are inspired to learn when they are encouraged to exercise curiosity, and most develop an investment in learning when they are allowed to work on a problem, puzzle, or question they've chosen to pursue.

We know that some of the assignments in this book will seem too advanced for beginning writers, but our approach is premised on the belief that students develop the ability to articulate complex thoughts only by reading and writing above their current level of achievement. Students who practice simplicity never develop an affective connection to or investment in what they have written. So we begin with having our students, regardless of their level of achievement, practice acts of attention and self-reflection, and then we quickly move them on to larger writing projects, well before they are "ready." Why? Because we know that trying to get students to figure out how to structure a paragraph, organize an argument, or punctuate a sentence doesn't work when they don't care about what they're writing. Or to play off a familiar saying, we see the challenge this way: give a student a formula, and she can get a good grade today; teach a student how to use writing as a technology for thinking new thoughts, and she can learn for the rest of her life.

## CAN ALL STUDENTS DEVELOP CREATIVE AND CURIOUS HABITS OF MIND?

We have the same students you do: most of the students who end up in our classes arrive expecting straightforward instructions that lead to the right answer and a good grade. Why? Because this is what they have spent more than a decade practicing in their formal education. There's no magic solution to this problem. It takes time and a high tolerance for the messiness of creativity to establish a culture in the classroom that encourages students to embrace the challenge of practicing the habits of mind discussed in this book.

At the beginning of the process, most students simply don't believe us when we say that there's no formula for generating arguments and insights. And at the end of the process, some students still don't believe us. But for those who commit enough time and energy to learn how to develop questions of their own in response to an assignment, a new world of possibilities opens up: they find that, through research and reading, they can define their own ways of answering their questions. And then many of them—even the reluctant learners—begin to invest themselves in their projects in ways that have the potential to transform their relationship to education. The process of developing writerly habits of mind isn't as simple as flicking a switch. Students make progress and then backslide, and at times the only sign of progress will be that the writing is getting messier. But if you embrace the philosophy of consciousness that underlies our approach and give your students time to try, fail, and try again, by the end of term most of the students will have produced what they recognize as the best, most significant writing they've ever done—inside or outside of school.

## WHY DOESN'T *HABITS OF THE CREATIVE MIND* ADDRESS ALL THE STAGES OF THE WRITING PROCESS, INCLUDING BRAINSTORMING, OUTLINING, DRAFTING, EDITING, AND POLISHING?

We don't believe there is a single, ideal writing process; rather, there are multiple writing processes. If pushed to identify how to begin an essay, we'd point not to "brainstorming" but to the habit of curiosity, which opens the door to reading, conversing, pondering, connecting and other habits of the creative mind. In our view, all the problems of writing—how to formulate a productive question, how to make connections to other voices and other ideas, how to push through to a genuine insight—are present at *every* stage of these multiple writing processes. The effort to simplify writing into a series of discrete stages that one moves through in linear fashion is, to our mind, designed to reduce writing to a tool for generating pseudo-arguments. We've eschewed such simplification and throughout the

book have sought to emphasize the fact that writing well is not an innate talent but rather that writers' habits of mind can be acquired through sustained, challenging practice.

#### WHY DO THE ESSAYS AND ASSIGNMENTS IN *HABITS OF THE CREATIVE MIND* FOCUS ON NONFICTION INSTEAD OF RHETORIC, SCHOLARLY ESSAYS, OR FICTION?

We've taught writing courses that have worked with nonfiction, academic writing, and fiction. The market is filled with textbooks and readers that focus on fiction, and there are plenty of rhetorics and grammars; there are also good books about academic writing. We chose to focus on smart, well-written journalistic and literary nonfiction because it offers students accessible examples of writers engaging creatively with the most pressing problems of our time. While we know that our approach can work with academic writing and fiction, we believe that creative nonfiction has the potential to be the most influential genre of writing this century. If *Habits of the Creative Mind* gets students to develop a taste for creative nonfiction, it will contribute to providing them with the foundation for a lifelong commitment to learning.

#### WHY AREN'T THERE MORE READINGS IN THE BOOK?

We had originally planned to leave out readings in *Habits of the Creative Mind*, but — when we sent our manuscript out for review — we learned that including a few readings selections would in fact help teachers get the project off the ground.

Our reasons for not wanting to include any readings at all were partially financial and partially pedagogical. The financial argument for not including any readings is straightforward: the more readings we include, the higher the cost of the book. Our pedagogical argument for not including any readings was this: if we omitted readings, teachers would draw on the Web to build their own readers and, in so doing, would become co-collaborators in advancing *Habits of the Creative Mind* as a project. The fellow instructors who reviewed our manuscript made it clear that this approach wasn't ideal for all teachers.

Our hope is that the combination of the three readings we have included and the readings we've recommended in the Explore section at the end of each essay will put teachers and students alike in a position to make the larger project of cultivating the habits of the creative mind their own. We know that there's more good writing freely available on the Web right now than any single person could read in a lifetime. And we know as well that there will be excellent essays written after this book goes to print that will be well worth teaching. Once your students and your colleagues start suggesting exciting essays to

assign, you'll know that you're working in a community in which practicing curiosity has become a habit.

**WHY DO YOU SUGGEST HOW MUCH TIME STUDENTS SHOULD SPEND ON SOME ASSIGNMENTS BUT NOT HOW LONG THEIR ESSAYS AND RESPONSES SHOULD BE?**

We want to foster habits of attention and perseverance, so we often include instructions that ask the students to stick with a given activity for thirty minutes or longer to help them establish these new habits. We decided that it was best not to specify an average or ideal length for the writing assignments because we mean for teachers who use the book to adapt assignments to meet the needs of particular courses, institutions, and students. (If pressed, though, we'd say that it's best to err on the side of longer responses.)

**WHY IS THERE A SEPARATE EXERCISE FOR BLIND OR VISUALLY IMPAIRED STUDENTS AFTER THE ESSAY "ON ENCOUNTERING DIFFICULTY" BUT NOT AFTER ANY OTHER ESSAY?**

We felt it was necessary to offer different assignments for seeing and visually impaired students following the essay where we discuss Oliver Sacks's writing about blindness because that essay is centrally concerned with how varied the response to losing one's sight can be. The dual assignments in this context are meant to underscore the implicit assumption in virtually every writing classroom that the students and teacher can see.

We're aware that we could have drafted alternative assignments for every single essay in the book. But we know from our experiences in the classroom that we can't anticipate all of the possible differences and the appropriate accommodations that may be required in any given class. We decided to leave such adjustments to individual teachers, who we anticipate will already be adapting our assignments to local settings as well as to particular students.

**IS IT POSSIBLE TO USE *HABITS OF THE CREATIVE MIND* TO PREPARE STUDENTS FOR STANDARDIZED WRITING ASSESSMENT?**

Every writing teacher we know feels the tension between the demands of standardized assessment and the desire to engage students' curiosity and creativity. We believe that, despite the pressure teachers feel to teach students to write for such tests, students will never learn to work with the ideas of others or to write thoughtfully without practicing the habits of curiosity and creativity. In our own classrooms, over the course of many years—

while working with students in high schools, community colleges, and private and public four-year colleges—we’ve found that teaching these foundational intellectual and behavioral practices is the best way to give students the opportunity to experience what it means to be thoughtful, to have a deep insight, and to have the desire to share a discovery with others. Those experiences don’t stand in the way of performing well in other contexts, including on standardized writing tests; in fact, they make it possible for students to see that every context comes with constraints and that the creative mind can always find a way to turn a constraint into an opportunity to excel.

#### **HOW DO YOU GRADE THE PAPERS WRITTEN BY STUDENTS WHO ARE TRYING TO DEVELOP**

#### **THE HABITS OF A CREATIVE MIND?**

We’ve left unanswered a few questions that are at the heart of any creative enterprise: How do you judge the quality of what has been submitted? What are the standards for assessment? These questions are so important that they deserve their own essay. See “On Evaluating Student Writing” below for our discussion of how to establish clear standards for assessing student work and why it is essential to have students regularly practice the inescapably interpretive act of assessment.

## On Evaluating Student Writing

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“Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.” “Everyone has a right to his or her own opinion.” “All judgments about writing quality are subjective.” These are some of the statements our students make to express their skepticism about the possibility of objectively evaluating their writing. We think it’s a mistake to respond to skepticism about objectivity with arguments that the evaluation of writing can or should be wholly objective. Rather, we stress that any judgment of the quality of a piece of writing necessarily has a subjective element. But this does not mean that all judgments about writing are therefore necessarily arbitrary. Rather, it means that the act of evaluation is always an interpretive act. So we tell our students that, since the curious and creative mind is forever engaged in the act of interpretation, and since they themselves are developing the habits of the curious and creative mind, they needn’t fear the interpretive element of the assessment process.

To show students how our evaluation process is interpretive but not arbitrary, we give them our criteria for successful writing. We tell them that we are looking for writing that:

- asks genuine questions or poses genuine problems;
- works with thought-provoking sources;
- shows the writer’s mind at work making compelling connections and developing ideas, arguments, or thoughts that are new to the writer;
- explores complications (perhaps by using words like *but* and *or*);
- is presented and organized to engage bright, attentive readers;
- and makes each word count.

Our students find our list of outcomes puzzling at first, since it emphasizes assessing their writing for what it does, as opposed to how well their writing adheres to the conventions governing thesis statements, arguments, evidence, and grammatical correctness. To make our evaluation of their work less of a mystery, we give them many opportunities to practice applying our standards—both to texts we read for class and to their own writing. Throughout the semester, students read examples of engaging, research-driven nonfiction. And all semester long we talk with them about what it means to use writing as a technology for showing the mind at work on a problem. Where does the writer pose questions? What

does the writer do to engage and guide the reader? What is the shape of the path on which the writer leads the reader? What kinds of sources does the writer draw on? What work does the writer do with the words and ideas of others? Where do we see evidence of the writer's curiosity? Of the writer's creativity? By repeatedly emphasizing that writing is a technology for thinking new thoughts, we teach students to *read as writers* so that they come to recognize how writers work with language, ideas, and structure to bring new thoughts to light. Over the course of the semester, our students see that we want them to apply the same standards to their own writing as they apply when reading published writing by professionals.

Another benefit of having our students practice applying our assessment standards to the published writing they read for the class, the reading they do on their own, the writing of their peers, and their own writing is that they gain firsthand experience with the interpretive part of the process. And as they gain this experience, we ask them if there are ways to make their own assessments fairer and their subjective judgments less arbitrary. The answer, of course, is yes, with practice.

So how does this work? First we'll provide you with an example of the kind of assignments we have our students write, and then we'll turn to an example of student writing from one of our classes.

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We like our assignments to have titles that tell students exactly what we expect from them. Our "Be Interested" assignment, for example, which is the first step in a longer project, asks our students to demonstrate their interest in anything that touches on the world of ideas. Pursuing their interest should ideally involve going someplace that's new to them: they can attend a scholarly lecture or an artistic event on campus, or they can go to a city planning meeting or sit in on a court trial. What they choose doesn't matter to us; what does matter is that they are *actively interested* in what they've chosen.

The assignment explains how we want our students to make their interest visible to others:

In advance of attending the event you've chosen, do preliminary research that puts you in a position to ask a good question once you get there.

After the event, write up an intellectually engaging account that introduces the event's central problem, concern, or question. Write your way to a question that the event raised for you, one that can't be answered

with basic information alone but that requires thought and research beyond the time you put in before the event.

Then begin to do the research required to address the question the event raised for you. We expect you to begin with informational sources and to keep digging until you find two sources that advance your thinking in significant ways. We are interested in the two sources that you find *after* you've moved beyond the basic background information.

All the students we've had do this assignment have experienced some level of difficulty completing it. Most of our beginning students have never voluntarily attended a lecture or gone to a gallery or attended a civic meeting; most don't know where the university publicizes events that are free and open to the public. Some students haven't found any of the available options to be of interest and have asked to be allowed to watch a lecture on the Internet or visit a Web site. And we've had more than one student come to class empty-handed, having been unable to find anything out there that interests them.

Being interested, it turns out, is a lot harder than it seems at first. Like being curious and being creative, being interested is something that needs to be practiced to the point that it becomes a habit. To get our students practicing, we begin by teaching them how to exhibit the habits of the interested: ask questions, do research that drills down past the first link, ask more questions, follow details, and locate interesting and original sources. Being interested, they need to discover, is not the same as being entertained; it's an active endeavor, not a passive one.

After we've made some headway along these lines, we give them a second writing assignment, one that is directly linked to the first one. The challenge this time? "*Be Interesting.*"

Engaging with the sources you've found, use your writing to show your mind at work on the question, problem, or mystery that has emerged from your encounter with your sources.

Begin with your interests and then *be interesting*: use your writing to create an experience for your readers that is designed to generate interest in what you've discovered. We invite you to use any of our common readings as a model of how to move from being interested in a given question to creating writing that makes that question interesting to others.

This assignment generates in its wake further discussions about whether it is possible to determine whether a writer is interested or a work is interesting. And this is exactly as it

should be: for our students to succeed in producing writing that is interesting to others, they need to spend time thinking in concrete terms about what interesting writing *does*.

An example will help to clarify what we value in *interested* and *interesting* student writing. Let's look at the first page of a breakthrough piece of writing by Donald, a sophomore communications major. Donald switched topics between the "Be Interested" and "Be Interesting" assignments because in the act of completing the first assignment he found that he wasn't actually interested in what he chose to write about. (We view this as a way of successfully completing the first part of the project: creativity always proceeds via experimentation, and experimentation, by definition, always includes the possibility of failure.) Having pursued a dead end in the first assignment, in the "Be Interesting" assignment Donald turned to an experience that was haunting him.

I had just recently come back from what I was telling people was "the best experience of my life." Over my winter break at Rutgers University, I decided to try something different and embarked on a ten-day trip sponsored by a Korean organization called the Good News Corps that eventually brought me to Monterrey, Mexico, where I participated in the IYF (International Youth Fellowship) English Camp. The camp aimed to teach English to Mexican students of all ages over the course of three days. The whole trip only cost \$300.

The memories were still fresh in my mind: the laughing, the dancing, the singing, the half-dozen girls holding me crying, thanking me for coming. Except now all these warm fuzzy feelings were being replaced with something else, something much more unsettling. I was having trouble processing what I was reading on my computer screen.

It was an article about the trip that made the front page of nytimes.com, titled "Traveling to Teach English; Getting Sermons Instead." [It was] sent to me by another student who went on the trip. The article details the account of two students who went home early in the trip while we were still in Dallas, Texas, for four days of "training" in preparation for teaching in Mexico. They felt they were victims of a scam, and were unhappy with how much of the camp centered on religion and the "Mind Lectures" of the program's leader, Ock Soo Park. This wasn't surprising, as I had met plenty of kids there who were upset for the same reasons, myself included, but most of us toughed it out for the sake of being able to go to Mexico. It was the comments section that was causing my state of disbelief.

*“Evil. Creepy and Evil.”*

*“Sounds an awful lot like the bad parts of Jonestown.”*

*“While editorial concerns must have precluded Mr. Dwyer from calling a duck a duck, we all know these unwitting students got trapped in a recruitment session for a cult.”*

*“Typical cult strategies.”*

*“This sounds like the Moonie cult from years ago.”*

*“This organization is essentially considered a cult in South Korea, known as ‘Saviorists.’”*

And they went on.

“This can’t be right,” was all I could think. Different flashes of my trip started replaying in my head. The mass baptisms in the hotel pool. The two-hour mind lectures. The lack of sleep. My moment of revelation. Could it be true? Did I willingly drink the Kool-Aid? Did I become part of a cult recruitment session for ten days?

When we have students read each other’s work (which is something we do constantly), we don’t ask them to say what they liked or didn’t like about what they’ve read. Rather, we ask them to use our rubrics to guide their assessment of the work the writer has done. In this instance, they’d read Donald’s draft and considered the following questions:

- Does it ask a genuine question or pose a genuine problem?
- Does it work with thought-provoking sources?
- Does it show the writer’s mind at work making compelling connections and developing ideas, arguments, or thoughts that are new to the writer?
- Does it pursue complications (perhaps by using words like *but* and *or*)?
- Is it presented and organized to engage smart, attentive readers?
- Does it make each word count?

Although we’ve only provided you with the first page of Donald’s essay, we think there’s enough in this sample to suggest that he is on his way to producing work that meets the criteria for being interesting, as we define the term. The writer is trying to figure out whether he, an ordinary guy who is well grounded and content with his life, came close to getting caught in a cult. While Donald doesn’t present much research on this first page, you can definitely see his mind at work on a problem. He actively pursues complications in the shift he makes from his unsurprised response to the newspaper article to his surprised

response to the readers' comments. We don't have enough to go on from this sample to say much about how he works with sources, and we can't say that every last word counts, but there's no doubt in our minds that Donald has done a great job of drawing readers into his predicament.

If a writer sustains this level of performance throughout an entire essay, then we know we're at the higher end of the grading scale. How high? Well, that depends. How good are the sources? How compelling are the connections the writer makes between his experience and his research? How does the writer shape the voyage through the material he has collected, and how well does the writer mark the moves in his discussion? Does the writing not only appear to be relatively error-free but also show signs of having been crafted with care? Each of these questions requires an act of interpretation to be answered, and the assessments that result from these acts of interpretation must all be based on what the writer has written on the screen or on the page.

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We recognize that the terms and criteria we've provided for evaluating student writing won't work for every teacher in every setting. We know that many teachers have to use locally defined outcomes and standards to evaluate student writing. If you've read what we have to say about how we evaluate student writing using a transparent system of assessment but still have concerns about how to map our ideas onto locally defined outcomes and standards, we encourage you to become familiar with the *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing*. This document, jointly produced by the Council of Writing Program Administrators, the National Council of Teachers of English, and the National Writing Project, begins by affirming, as we do, that certain habits of mind are "essential for success in college writing": curiosity, openness, engagement, creativity, persistence, responsibility, flexibility, and metacognition.

The *Framework* goes on to describe how teachers can cultivate these habits of mind through particular writing, reading, and thinking experiences, all of which are based on the Council of Writing Program Administrators Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition. Because the kinds of practice the *Framework* recommends are linked to first-year composition outcomes, the categories of writing experience described in the document will be entirely familiar to most writing teachers: rhetorical knowledge; critical thinking; writing processes; knowledge of conventions; and ability to compose in multiple environments (from pen and paper to digital technology). The *Framework* provides a

valuable example of how to link a pedagogy that fosters curious and creative habits of mind to a traditional set of writing outcomes.

Whatever the specific standards you use to evaluate writing in your courses, we recommend that you initiate a system of assessment that your students will accept as fair and reasonable by doing the following:

- Openly discuss the inevitable role that interpretation plays in the assessment process.
- Make known the rubrics for assessment in the course from the outset.
- Give the students multiple opportunities to practice applying the rubrics to what they're reading and to what they and their peers are writing.
- Write assignments that clearly indicate—ideally in the title—what the assignment's goal is and that clearly state what work the students' writing must *do* to establish that the goal has been achieved.
- Sequence assignments so that the work in one assignment is reinforced and built on in subsequent assignments.
- Accept that initial efforts to complete an assignment can result in failure, and allow for shifts in direction or focus in the move from draft to draft and from assignment to assignment.
- Discuss student work in class and make visible your own interpretive process, including your ways of working to a final assessment.

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Despite our book's title, in the end we don't grade students' habits of mind; we grade their writing. While we have fashioned a pedagogy that pushes back against standardized testing and formulaic writing, it should be clear this doesn't mean we favor either low or no standards. Rather, what we advocate is getting students to be actively curious, attentive, and creative when they think, read, and write so that they develop more interesting thoughts and ideas to communicate to others. Having a transparent system for evaluating student work is central to the success of this project, as is having standards that are appropriately challenging and fairly applied. You will know that you have succeeded in establishing such a learning environment when your students don't disparage the role that interpretation plays in the assessment process but rather come to see interpretation as the creative act of bringing writing to life.

## Creativity at Work: Mike Rose and the Teaching of Possibility

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Mike Rose's career as a pioneer in the study of literacy might easily never have happened. Born in Pennsylvania to Italian immigrants who subsequently relocated to Los Angeles, Rose was an average student through junior high. Then, because of a clerical error during his transition to high school, he was placed in the vocational track, where he would have remained until graduation but for a teacher who was puzzled by the presence of the bright, unchallenged boy at the back of the room. Rose's life and his life possibilities were changed by the persistence of this teacher, who uncovered the clerical error and had Rose moved to the college-bound track. This firsthand experience of the role that chance can play in a student's education profoundly shaped Rose's sense of the relationship between schooling and destiny. In *Lives on the Boundary* (1989), his groundbreaking work on remedial students, Rose recounts the story of his voyage from the lowest rung of academic achievement to becoming a doctoral student in educational research.

Rose's view of how to reform education is defined by his empathic connection with underperforming students: taking a stand against the tide of reforms that urge more testing, Rose has insisted for more than thirty years that reform must begin with the training of teachers, so that the false connection between low test scores and illiteracy can be broken. We need a better way to understand why schools fail, he maintains, than is provided by critiques of the bureaucratic maze of public education. To develop this better understanding, Rose spent four years traveling the country, visiting classrooms and watching and listening to how young people are being taught. In *Possible Lives: The Promise of Public Education in America* (1996), Rose reports his findings and makes a call for

a different kind of critique, one that does not minimize the inadequacies of curriculum and instruction, the rigidity of school structure, or the "savage inequalities" of funding but that simultaneously opens discursive space for inspired teaching, for courage, for achievement against odds, for successful struggle, for the insight and connection that occur continually in public school classrooms around the country. Without a multiplicity of such moments, criticism becomes one-dimensional, misses too much, is harsh, brittle, the humanity drained from it.

Public education demands a capacious critique, one that encourages both dissent and invention, fury and hope. Public education is bountiful, crowded, messy, contradictory, exuberant, tragic, frustrating, and remarkable. We need an expanded vocabulary, adequate to both the daily

joy and daily sorrow of our public schools. And we are in desperate need of rich, detailed images of possibility.

Over the years that have followed this call, Rose has devoted his writing life to providing his own “rich, detailed images of possibility” in books that document the literate practices of working people, of high school grads who don’t head off to college immediately, and of teachers seeking to create classrooms that have humane and democratic pedagogies. Why can Rose see possibility where others only see failure? Because he knows that his own success was made possible both by teachers who could see the person beyond the placement scores and by his own work redefining what literacy is and how it gets valued.