

Pathways and Reflections on Teaching

I cannot be a teacher without exposing who I am. Without revealing, either reluctantly or with simplicity, the way I relate to the world, how I think politically . . . as a consequence, one of my major preoccupations is the approximation between what I say and what I do, between what I seem to be and what I am actually becoming.

—Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of Freedom*

Through the hundreds of hours interviewing and editing involved in the making of this book, I became aware of how often teachers talked about their past educators and mentors who ultimately helped guide their paths to teaching. I heard teachers talk about their pedagogies and practices as *becoming*, as not yet complete. I listened to them share how they were inspired to teach because of the communities around them. There is a degree of vulnerability in the work we do as teachers. Teaching is personal. Every teacher has a story, and that story is often connected to others: family, friends, teachers-scholars, and of course, students. That sense of community is one of the most special things about teaching writing—we are mentored by others and we mentor students by how we approach teaching and learning. Teaching is inherently collaborative. I chose to start this book with *pathways and reflections on teaching* because all our stories are unique.

The word *pathway* is used to describe interconnectedness and sequential order in the natural sciences (e.g., physiology, biochemistry) and is used in the social sciences (e.g., archaeology, anthropology) to locate sites, societies, and human activity. Of course, it can also be used as a metaphor. I see pathway connected to the classroom, which is a site or channel for learning that brings together

teachers, students, reading, writing, texts, languages, cultures, and identities. The classroom is one space, of many, that centers itself on exploration and discovery. The heart of this collection, *Teachers Talking Writing*, reveals the multilayered nuances of teaching writing, including the different pathways, sites, elements, and interactions that occur in teaching. This first chapter shows how teaching is a communal endeavor and a complex individual process. Teaching exposes us.

No one has to convince us that writing is meaningful and important. We already know how profound writing is to life. Peter Elbow (2004) describes writing as a powerful tool that helps students “converse with themselves, and tackle both cultural messages and peer pressures” (p. 12). Donald Murray (1972) says *writing is thinking* and tells teachers to “be quiet, to listen, to respond” (p. 5). The act of being in conversation with others and listening seems essential to our profession as writing teachers. It seems important in building a global community of teacher-scholars and central to building community with students in our classrooms. How are we listening, and who are we listening to? Conventional scholarship (e.g., peer-reviewed alphabetic texts) is one representation of listening and extending conversations about teaching writing. Digital scholarship (e.g., podcasts) is another way of producing and circulating writing instruction knowledge. Interviewing as a method of inquiry makes more visible *thinking and listening*. Through interviews, we hear the thought processes of people and see what informs and influences theory and praxis. This book relies on interviews to build knowledge about teaching writing.

This chapter, and really this collection, is about listening to stories and approaches to teaching writing. Stories unveil glimpses of identities, such as who we are, where we come from, and what we believe about teaching and language. It seems to me that teaching writing and learning about teaching is a metacognitive reflective practice. Unlike the other chapters in this book, this one doesn't begin with a theoretical overview of the conversation that exists in scholarship. The purpose of this chapter is to position interviewing and listening as a knowledge-constructing, meaning-making activity. Listening is a community-building practice, too. This chapter celebrates pathways to teaching and preserves voices in our field.

We learn a lot by reading teacher-scholars, especially those who have spent decades teaching writing. These archives are integral to the field's history and development. This chapter captures some perspectives that have made a significant impact on composition theory and practice. Unlike the other chapters in this section, this one isn't about a specific place (e.g., two-year college). The through-line in this chapter is how teachers are always being informed by and alongside past and present individuals and communities. The imprint we make on students in our own classes is a window into our past. As teachers, we can trace moments in our life that have shaped our praxis, and we can celebrate those who have come before us who have helped create pathways forward.

INTERVIEWS

The interviews¹ in this chapter serve as a small representation of narratives about first experiences teaching and recollections of theories and practices from five teacher-scholars, each having taught for at least thirty-five years in writing classes: Mike Rose, Nancy Sommers, Chris M. Anson, Chuck Bazerman, and Beverly J. Moss. Rose shares how “he didn't know what the hell [he] was doing” when he first walked in the classroom in 1968. He talks about how teaching challenges us to learn more about “human beings . . . about language and literacy.” Sommers mentions her junior high language arts teacher, high school English teacher, a college literature professor, and her dissertation advisor as people who took “leaps of faith with [her].” She says these teachers inspired her to work with students who didn't have confidence in themselves as writers. Anson describes his graduate school experience in the late 1970s and early 1980s. He talks about two mentors who helped him develop as a writing teacher. Bazerman talks about how teaching first and third graders was a “revelation,” and Moss ends our conversation by reflecting on the moment she realized she could study African American community literacies, which created a pathway for her to incorporate different methodologies and writing practices (e.g., ethnographies) in the classroom.

1 Transcriptions throughout this book have been slightly modified for coherency and cohesive purposes. Text/audio won't always align. I attempt to remain as faithful to the contributor's words and intentions as possible.

Shane to Mike Rose: I'd like for you to think back to 1968 when you first walked into the classroom as a teacher. What were you thinking and how were you feeling in that moment? What did you think teaching was going to be like? [Episode 1: 02:12–07:29]

You know, it was so long ago that I'm not sure my memory is going to be that specific, but I can tell you what the situation was and maybe as we talk about it some thoughts will come back to me. The first actual teaching I did was when I was twenty-four, and I had just joined the program called the Teacher Corps. It's no longer around, but it was one of the Johnson Era War on Poverty programs . . . Teacher Corps would place folks like me in communities of need and we would work with existing schools. There would be teams of four interns. Then, we would have what we called a "team leader." This was a person who was an experienced teacher in that district. It was sort of a guru, our guide, knew everything and knew everybody, and guided us four little ducklings around the community and the school.

So, there I was. I was twenty-four. I had started a PhD program in English and realized it wasn't for me. Then I had taken a year of courses in psychology because I thought, well, maybe that's the route I wanted to go, and that was at a time when academic psychology was still pretty heavily experimental in its orientation in a way that just didn't capture me. So . . . I joined this program and set out with my team to a community called El Monte which is east of East Los Angeles. At that time, it was a working-class White and Latino community and we were assigned to an elementary school . . . I had been meeting with my team for the whole summer. We organized around a local college or university, in our case, it was USC. For the whole summer, this team of four people with our team leader, Ben Campos, we spent that summer reading books, and talking with each other, and getting to know each other.

Ben took us through the community of El Monte. I mean we met everybody. We met the priest, we met the

mechanic, we met parents, we met kids, we met teachers. And we just became deeply acquainted with the community, so by the time school started and I was ready to walk into the first day with this teacher who I would be working with, we already knew the community. That was a hugely important feature of this program—I wish teacher education programs today had more of that component.

I'm trying my best, Shane, to think back to what that was like, and I can tell you I had the really good fortune of being connected with a woman named Rosalie Naumann, who was just a magnificent 5th and 6th grade teacher. I think going into those first few weeks, I was probably pretty uncertain. I didn't know what the hell I was doing exactly. I felt comfortable in the community because we had been there. I felt comfortable with my teammates. I felt very comfortable with Ben and his advice, and I had gotten to know Rosalie the week or two before. But in terms of what I expected, I got to tell you, I didn't know much, and my recollection, hazy as it is, is that I was pretty green and pretty nervous and really willing to follow the lead of this teacher, Rosalie, who fortunately was just as skilled as could be.

Those were my first weeks of teaching . . . a bunch of 6th graders, primarily working-class White and Latino kids, so that was where I first cut my teeth on reading and writing, on teaching reading and writing with this group of kids. I was green. I was young. I didn't know what the hell I was doing and was kind of excited to see what would happen.

Shane to Mike Rose: How have you grown as a teacher? What has changed the most since teaching 6th graders in El Monte, California? [Episode 1: 07:40–13:17]

I've got to say I am so lucky that I love to teach probably more, actually, than I did then. I was eager to do it. I was scared. And trepidatious. I still have a little tinge of that anticipation, I guess, when I walk into a classroom.

But I'm just blessed that it means as much to me now or more as it did when I started out. So what has changed? Well, hopefully I have gotten better at it. You know, you just pick up so many tricks of the trade along the way: How to ask a question, how to give feedback, how to spot when someone is having a difficult time with something, how to see through and understand various kinds of reluctance or resistance. You know, there's just so much you pick up with time. Hopefully, I have learned a lot in that regard.

I'm still as excited, maybe even more so, about the kind of interaction teaching involves. There's something profoundly special it seems to me about having the good fortune to teach because you really are participating with other people in their development. I mean, what other kind of work allows you to do that? I guess certain kinds of pastoral counseling and therapy, maybe certain kinds of medicine or certain ways medicine is practiced. But you know, there's not many occupations that provide that opportunity to get close into people's lives and help them grow in a way they want to grow. So that just captivates me still and means so much to me.

. . . I've also come to appreciate how important listening is . . . I can't tell you what a fundamental pedagogical skill listening has become for me over the decades. I think the better you can hear what someone is asking when they ask a question, or the better you can hear what someone is trying to do with a piece of writing, and the better you are at remembering all that so that you're able to bring it up weeks later in connection with something somebody else says. That kind of really focused and targeted, serious listening is just so rare. Period. I mean think of it, how many people do you know that really listen to you when you sit down to talk with them? . . . I find myself desiring these close-knit and intimate interactions where you have to work really hard in a focused way to understand where somebody is at, where they are trying to go, what it is they

are trying to do with a piece of writing, and how to help them get there.

Shane to Nancy Sommers: What led you to teach, and what was your first experience teaching like? [Episode 6: 02:07–06:09]

Oh, it's so much fun to think back on what led me to teaching. You know, we always have to be careful when we try to identify or tell the story of our origins, but if I were to try to look back all those years, I would look back all the way to junior high when we had Career Day and the boys and girls were separated, and the girls had the choices to learn about being a nurse, a homemaker, or a teacher. Those were the only choices, and you can only imagine the boys of course had much more exciting choices—doctor, lawyer, engineer. At that moment, I was very excited to think about teaching and what that might mean, so I formed very early in my mind this idea that I would be a teacher. I don't believe I really understood what that meant, but it was just part of my own identity as I went through high school and college.

I think partly, too, it's because I have had so many crazy, wonderful, idiosyncratic teachers who took leaps of faith with me. I wasn't an obviously promising student at various points in my career, but I had these wonderful teachers. I think of an eighth-grade language arts teacher, a high school English teacher, a college literature professor, and my dissertation advisor, who all took leaps of faith with me. There was something about that, that said to me, "I want to do that too. I want very much to find those students who don't believe that they have promise, academic or otherwise, and help them to see that." I think that became a mission.

In college we were all very, very political, and at a certain point, I realized that I was not actually going to solve all the problems, end the war or . . . create peace in the world, but that maybe I could help somebody write a good sentence, and maybe I could help somebody appreciate literature. That seemed like, again, a good direction.

My first teaching experience was teaching 8th grade, and I look back and smile when I think about that year. I was at Northwestern University and they had a program that took undergrad . . . or recent college graduates and said, “You can go into the classroom.” I suppose there was a teaching shortage or otherwise we wouldn’t have been able to do that. We had almost no training, and we were just plumped into classrooms in Chicago.

I had tremendous amount of enthusiasm and great passion, very much a person of my time. I just wanted the students to go outside, and read Walt Whitman, and conjugate the color green, and think about *Leaves of Grass*, and look under the microscope, and look at grass, and write about it, and write poems about it. I had just read *Pride and Prejudice*, and I wanted my 8th graders to read that, too. It was a crazy curriculum as I think about it, but students became very enthusiastic and loved it. One thing led to another, I traveled and taught English as a second language in various places in Europe and in Israel. Then, I came back and went to graduate school which started my real interest and love for teaching and writing.

Shane to Chris M. Anson: You were in a unique position as a graduate student in the late 1970s and early 1980s when composition was developing new theories and practices. Do you mind talking about that experience? [Episode 25: 01:29–07:48]

I was at Syracuse University doing a master’s in creative writing before I got to Indiana. My first semester there, I was working as an administrative assistant in the office of Project Advance, which was one of the first advanced-college dual-credit programs in the country. I was working alongside a newly minted professor out of the University of Chicago named Bob Schwegler. One of our responsibilities was to help shape the writing curriculum so that high school teachers could be trained to teach high-performing high school students in order to earn Syracuse credit while they were seniors in high school.

I was really interested in everything in the English department. I was interested in all the areas of literary study I was doing, and in creative writing. I was really interested in Medieval literature and Old English. I kept talking to Schwegler about what I might do next after this master's, because I knew I wasn't going to probably become the world's next greatest novelist. He asked, "Well, what do you want to do?" I said, "I'm interested in Medieval literature." And he said, "You're probably not going to find it very easy to get a position when you graduate. There are not a lot of jobs in Medieval literature. But there's this new area on the horizon. It goes by various terms, but typically *composition studies*, or *rhetoric and composition*. You should come to a reading group that I'm involved in and start reading some of the material."

I signed on as a young graduate student, and the faculty were reading early, early composition work by people like Janet Emig and James Britton and others. I got really fascinated in that work. When I explained that to my creative writing peers, they didn't want anything to do with it. They really felt that it was not appropriate to dissect the writing process. This was something that worked by talent and inspiration, not something that you could scientifically anatomize. So I kind of fell away from that ideology, and I started reading more, going to more of these meetings, and getting more exposed to the literature. I became so interested that, toward the last months of my M., Schwegler suggested I apply to PhD programs [in rhetoric and composition].

There were very few at that time. It was 1979. There was one at UT Austin, there was one at Indiana, and some other places . . . when I got to Indiana, the director of composition was Michael Flanigan . . . he became a fast mentor to me, and eventually a close friend of mine. It was really Michael who helped me understand student learners and student writers. I had not really had that much exposure to theories of teaching at Syracuse. I was very teacher-centered. I was very concerned about my knowledge,

my projection of knowledge, my appearance even, and not thinking much about what was really happening in the heads of my students. When I got to Indiana all that changed, because Michael soon helped me to understand and put into practice what I had been reading at Syracuse in that reading circle. I learned a great deal from him.

I owe it to Bob Schwegler that I'm in the field, and I owe it to Michael Flanigan that I learned to teach in a responsible, student-centered way. When I think about what I was doing at Syracuse, it was stand in the front of the room and maybe lecture a bit on principles of form or style, or even grammar, and not really think about what was happening with the students, and really not do much that was active. Flanigan changed all that for me. His curriculum was focused on active learning, on student engagement. Teachers didn't spend a whole lot of time in front of the class. They would present some things and get students to work. There would be lots of active discussion, a lot of small group work, a lot of follow up, and that stuck with me ever since.

Shane to Chuck Bazerman: What has surprised you or continues to surprise you the most about teaching writing? What stands out to you about composition studies over the past fifty years? [Episode 13: 01:41–06:39]

I've taught for over fifty years in higher-ed. What surprised me, continues to surprise me, and I've learned more about, is the students: What they know, how they perceive things, how they develop, how individual they are, and how much you have to speak to them to really be of any value. You need to somehow intervene in their own exploration and their own development. So that means you have to get to know them. My early teaching experience was in 1st grade and 3rd grade. The students were a revelation and that's what motivated me and that's what continues to motivate me. Everyone is different. Even if you're teaching the same course for the ninetieth time, they're different students. That's been the big surprise.

All the research and theory has been simply to understand *what is writing* so I can help students explore it and use it better as part of their own development. When I started, there were only a few general folk beliefs about writing: All writing was the same, “good” writing was “good” writing, some people had talent, others didn’t. Now, this is like partly true, it’s in most expression, you find it in yourself that there are certain favorite forms of writing and they define “real” writing . . . certain literary styles were favored and thought to be worth attention. Everything else was boring, nonfiction, non-creative, right?

As I’ve come to know writing a lot more alongside many colleagues . . . we’ve explored writing in different ways, both as the great variety of texts in the world, their role in the world, but also how people produce them and how people develop as readers. That’s the thing that’s most changed. Students are still students, right? They each come with their own histories and their own motives. But we have a lot more understanding of writing and texts, and how we can use them to help people grow as writers. I’ve looked into that myself and it’s moved from an individual facing the challenges of a particular task. Although, that’s important, that’s how we experience writing, that’s how our students experience writing. You start to see how writing done by many people over many millennia has really worked its way into the heart of society and, in fact, made possible the large forms of cooperation and identity and activity that formed the modern world.

I keep calling it the hidden infrastructure of modernity. It’s invisible to most people, the enormous importance it is. People’s development as writers and their processes are embedded in that great complexity . . . every role of power involves massive amounts of reading and writing. Writing—different from reading—is more receptive. Writing is having a voice. You don’t write, you don’t have a voice.

Shane to Beverly J. Moss: What got you interested in studying African American community literacies? How did you see connections

between community literacy and teaching writing? [Episode 9: 01:39–04:07]

It's an interesting moment, and this takes me back to when I was in graduate school. My dissertation director, Marcia Farr, is a sociolinguist by training, and so it was interesting to be introduced to composition and literacy studies and rhetoric through thinking about sociolinguistics. We read *Ways with Words* by Shirley Brice Heath. What was interesting to me about *Ways with Words* was not only the introduction to ethnography, because we were getting that in the course, we were getting introduced to the ethnography of literacy, but also that the site for *Ways with Words* was the area that my family grew up and still lives in. And that I was born in. I kept thinking, "Oh, my goodness, this is sort of about me." So there was a personal connection for me to that work—being from the Piedmont Carolinas—and having that as the site of her work, recognizing moments in that book when she's talking about what happens in those Black church services. I thought, "I've been in those services. I grew up in those settings." And it was that moment where I felt connected to the field in a different way, that I could do this kind of work.

I had gone to graduate school, particularly in composition and rhetoric, because I was interested in the kind of writing and literacies that people do outside of school that have an impact on what happens in the classroom, and here was this study that almost gave me permission to do that, that said, "Oh, yeah, this is actually a way for you to connect."

It gave me a methodology . . . I think about ethnography as a way of thinking. It gave me a way to think about the work I was interested in, and it was also encouragement to really think about and to explore different literacy. Literacy, not only possibilities, but sort of the literacy practices, the rich literacy practices in the communities that I grew up in, which sort of took me back to the Black church. I mean, the way that Heath presented information

opened up all these possibilities, but I thought there were even richer possibilities, there was more to do, more to see . . . I tell people I have an agenda. I don't hide that. My agenda is to document the rich literacy practices that occur in African American community spaces.

DENOUEMENT

As teachers, we have our own stories to tell. Some might look like the narratives above. Maybe we were inspired by a high school English teacher. Or we fell in love with a book because we saw ourselves in it, or we saw our community in it. Or an advisor or mentor told us to apply to graduate programs and we took a leap of faith. Even if some of our stories are similar, our pathways are all unique because we come from different places. We have different educational experiences, different teachers, different mentors. We have different histories and identities. You see, our pathways are different, but we share a common bond: we are committed to this work as educators because we understand how important teaching writing is for ourselves and students, as well as our local and global communities. Teaching draws us close into lives.

The interviews in this chapter, from teachers who have taught for a combined 150+ years, demonstrate how teaching is relational and communal. There is no other profession quite like it where 20 to 25 people with different histories and identities gather in the same room for months and learn together, read together, write together, share together. As teachers, we are in an extremely important position. Teaching is an opportunity to encourage and support students; to walk alongside lived experiences; to listen and share in learning; to facilitate meaning and knowledge; to advocate for agency and amplify voices and identities. Like writing, teaching is a process. Through these interviews, I listened to well-known, established writing teachers still asking questions and contemplating their teaching practices. They all understand where they started and how they are still becoming as writing teachers. How they are still *in process*. What stood out to me was their enthusiasm when it came to talking about students, and the childlike glee that came over them when they talked about their teachers and mentors, and

their unique paths to teaching. To me, teaching is about asking questions, listening, and learning how to ask better ones. It is a lifelong practice of reflection.

My hope is that the following questions will allow teachers and students another chance to talk about what it means to teach writing and the importance of writing itself. These questions give us an opportunity to reflect on our own histories, identities, values, and beliefs about language and writing. We are always adapting and evolving as writing teachers:

- What does it mean to teach composition in the 21st century? How are we defining literacy? What is the purpose of first-year writing?
- What key principles or concepts do you use to help you teach? What are your classroom practices and strategies communicating about what it means to learn, read, write, and compose?
- What assumptions or beliefs do you have about language? How are you addressing the politics of language through your teaching and assessment?
- What kind of classroom culture do you hope to establish with students? What are your outcomes and goals, and what strategies and alternative practices might help students engage with/in those outcomes?
- How are you meeting the needs of students in your institutional context? What approach to teaching might best support those students? How are you listening and responding to students and their writing?
- What resources are available in and around your institutional context, and how might you draw from those resources to grow as a teacher? How might you collaborate with colleagues and other departments or initiatives across campus?
- How are you embodying your sense of self through your teaching? How are you drawing on your own strengths, knowledges, and experiences? What is informing your teaching, and why?