OPINION: Writing for the Public

Mike Rose

For the past twenty years or so, I have been fortunate to write for a fairly broad audience. While I was teaching, or running an educational program, or doing research, I was also composing opinion pieces or commentaries about the work I was doing. This process of writing with part of my attention on the classroom or research site and part of it on the public sphere forced me—would force anyone—out of familiar rhetorical territory. As a result, I've been thinking a lot about both the challenge and the importance of academics and other specialists communicating with the general public—and I certainly have been thinking about how hard it is to do this. Our languages of specialization can be so opaque, and mass media are becoming all the more sound-bite and entertainment oriented. Serious consideration of serious issues is difficult to achieve.

Let me offer two moments from my own writing life that represent some of the tensions inherent in trying to write for a wider readership today.

Lives on the Boundary, a book about educational underpreparation published in 1989, was my first attempt to write about educational issues for the general public. When I began circulating early chapters to publishers in 1987, I received one form-letter rejection after another...at least a dozen in all. Then I lucked out and got an agent—though he didn't have much success either until he got a longtime acquaintance, an editor at the Free Press, to sit down with the thing. My agent told me later that the first question he typically got when he told editors I worked at the University of California—Los Angeles (UCLA) and did my research on education and literacy was some variation of, “Okay, but can he write?”

Mike Rose is a professor in the University of California—Los Angeles Graduate School of Education and Information Studies and author, most recently, of An Open Language: Selected Writing on Literacy, Learning, and Opportunity and Why School?: Reclaiming Education for All of Us. Part of this article was presented at the 2009 meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication in San Francisco.

College English, Volume 72, Number 3, January 2010

Copyright © 2010 by the National Council of Teachers of English. All rights reserved.
Media need experts in and out of the academy for their knowledge and opinion, but there is an odd relationship here. Those in broadcast media, in trade publishing, in the world of newspapers and magazines are reliant on expertise but, as a rule, are wary, even disdainful, of the expert's ability to communicate it. And not without reason. As so many of all ideological persuasions, in and out of the academy, have hammered home (see Patricia Nelson Limerick's "Dancing with Professors" for a classic treatment), we academic types can be long-winded, reliant on jargon, and given to tangent or an endless loop of qualification and nit-picking. Caught in the linguistic bubble of our specializations, we are often impervious to our inability to connect with a more general audience of listeners and readers. When all those editors knew of me came from a brief professional biography, they had reason to be cautious.

This leads me to my second vignette, which offers another piece of the story. Not too long ago, I sent a commentary on the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) to a magazine of social and political commentary, in which I had published before. So much had been written about NCLB that either dealt with it strictly on the political and policy level, or energetically championed or damned it, that I wanted to try a piece that, though critical, would consider the legislation from multiple perspectives and also explain in plain language the problems with some of its core mechanisms, like the standardized test.

To the editor's credit, I got a quick, personal response, affirming the importance of the topic. But my treatment of it was "too wonky." Could I write something that is "faster" as to what works, what doesn't, and why? The piece I sent was "too cautious." A "wonk" is someone who is taken by the details of a subject—in this case, educational policy—and the implication is of narrow preoccupation, getting lost in detail, a grind. I was trying to explain the key elements of a piece of public policy and reflect on its implications, but to this editor, what I was doing came across as tedious, boring, the domain of the policy wonk but not the general public. We were at an impasse.

The editor's comments highlight several characteristics of contemporary media's treatment of public policy and social issues, all of which have been much discussed, often by media people themselves.

The first has to do with the definition of news itself. The process by which an event gets tagged as newsworthy is influenced by a host of variables, from novelty, conflict, and sensationalism ("If it bleeds, it leads") to an editor's tastes and beliefs. A central issue here involves the scripts or narratives typically used to frame a story. In my case, the editor wanted a "what works/what doesn't" structure, a kind of ledger sheet that, I'll admit, would make for a quicker read. (The equivalent, if we were looking at the politics of NCLB, would be a "who's winning/who's losing" story line.) Scripts like these contribute to what gets defined as a good news story. Pertinent here is a troubling finding in the Project for Excellence in Journalism's The State of
the News Media 2008: the agenda of the American news media continues to narrow, not broaden. This is true, the report adds, for new media as well. Sadly, education gets a tiny percent of total news coverage, and that coverage will tend toward certain kinds of stories rather than others.

The second issue involves the increasing influence of an entertainment orientation on news and commentary. The length of stories is shrinking, as is their informational content. One example of many can be found in the average length of a presidential candidate’s television sound bite. During the 1968 election it was 42 seconds; by 2004 it had been clipped to 7.6 seconds. Newspapers and news magazines reflect the same impulse. Sam Zell, the real estate tycoon who owns the Chicago Tribune and Los Angeles Times, has been slashing and burning his papers to become, in his words, spicier, flashier, and easier to read.

And all this is affected by the explosion of new media. As words decrease, images proliferate, amped up via digital technology. To be sure, images can contribute to powerful inquiry, depending on how they’re sequenced and integrated with spoken or written text. But as Glynda Hull, a researcher of literacy and new media, observes, “Instead of examination of an issue, we tend to get simplification. The visual substitutes for narrative and analysis” (personal communication).

I’ve also noticed in print media, even in outlets pitched as highbrow, a rising value given to style that is arch or edgy. Liberal columnist Bob Herbert gets slammed in the liberal Washington Monthly because, though he’s on the side of the magazine’s angels, he’s “boring.” Snap and sizzle. The quick over the deliberative. “Surprise me,” an impatient public radio producer tells me as I pitch an idea for a Labor Day commentary.

If academics limit themselves through their specialized language, editors are limited as well by their own definitions of a newsworthy story and can overreact to the mere hint of scholarship, rejecting anything that, as one editor told me, “looks like a study.”

***

I want to suggest some ways for academics to write successfully within this communicative tangle. I’ll do so by describing two courses I developed to help graduate students write for broader audiences. These courses are housed in the place where I work, a graduate school of education, but, like education, rhetoric and composition is widely interdisciplinary and has a long reach into practice. The reader will see many parallels.

Education includes areas of study as diverse as history and developmental biology and psychology ... as well as economics, linguistics, anthropology, political science, sociology, statistics, and more. It is not uncommon for a student to study several
of these disciplines, acquiring their vocabularies and modes of argument along the way, acquiring as well the authority of disciplinary membership. But education is also intimately connected to broad public concerns, and the majority of students in education very much want to affect educational policy and practice. How do they turn, and tune, their voices from the seminar room to the public sphere? As they try to do so, they find themselves smack in the middle of a whole set of questions about communication: about writing, voice, audience, and the tension between the language of specialization and the language of public discourse. The school of education becomes a rhetorical laboratory.

I hadn't been in UCLA's School of Education for very long before these tensions became a focus of my teaching. Student after student in child development, or language policy, or the study of higher education sat in my office expressing a desire to make a difference in the world, to communicate with the public about educational issues that mattered deeply to them. But they didn't know how to do it, or, to be more exact, they worried that the specialized language of learning theory, or critical social thought, or organizational behavior that they had worked so hard to acquire both certified their authority in the academy and tongue-tied them when it came to writing for nonspecialists. Some also worried that these new languages—the syntax and vocabulary, the conventions and stance—left no room for a personal mark, for the deeply felt beliefs that brought them into education, for passion.

The first course I developed helps students become more effective scholarly writers. And while it certainly addresses everything from conventions of citation to summarizing a body of research literature, it also assists students in framing a tight argument and questioning it, in thinking hard about audience, in appropriating stylistic devices and considering the grace as well as informational content of their sentences.

The course is structured like a workshop, and each student begins by reading aloud a piece of his or her writing, even if half of it is charts and statistical tables. Because so many students in education come out of the social or psychological sciences, they have rarely, if ever, had the opportunity to think about their writing as writing and not just a vehicle to hold information. I want them to hear their writing. I urge them to find other scholarly and non-scholarly writers they like and read them like a writer, noting and analyzing what it is they do that works—and then incorporating those writers' techniques into their own work. At the end of the quarter, I think that the primary thing students acquire is a rhetorical sense of their writing; style and audience are more on their minds. As one student put it so well, "The course got me to think of my writing as strategic. Who am I writing to? Where do I want to take them with my argument? How can I get them there?" (For a fuller discussion of this course, see Rose and McClafferty.)

The second course shares a good deal with the workshop on scholarly writing,
but is designed to help students in education write for the general public. The goal is to produce two pieces of writing: the newspaper op-ed piece and the magazine article. Students can vary these for online media, but the purpose remains the same: to draw on one’s studies and research to write for a wide audience a 700- to 800-word opinion piece and a 1,500- to 2,500-word magazine article. Students are also required to familiarize themselves with appropriate outlets and submit to them.

To streamline our discussion here, I’ll focus on the opinion piece, though my students and I go through the same process and make some of the same discoveries in writing the magazine article.

On the first day of class, I distribute a variety of opinion pieces—and encourage students to subsequently bring in ones they find that catch their fancy. We operate inductively, reading the selections and looking for characteristics and commonalities. Students immediately notice the brevity and conciseness of the opinion piece (versus the longer, more elaborated writing of their disciplines). Claims and arguments are made quickly and without heavy citation or marshalling of other research relevant to the topic.

Evidence is present in the opinion piece, of course, but it will be one or two key statistics or examples or reports, or a telling and crisp quotation from another expert. The length of this essay won’t allow for many examples, but let me offer one here that my students liked. Writing about the plight of temp workers, labor policy analyst Laura Jones warns, “When it comes to benefits, temps better take their vitamins and look both ways before crossing the street: Only 5% receive employer-provided health insurance” (B5). The question that then emerges is, how does one select a sample of evidence that is vibrant yet still representative? Or, more challenging, how does one deal with conflicting evidence within constraints?

Students also notice features of the op-ed genre, particularly the “hook,” the linking of the piece onto an event in the news. And, in some pieces, the “turn,” that point where the writer, having summarized current policy or perception, turns the tables and offers another way—the way the writer prefers—to think about the issue at hand.

Opinion pieces are written in all kinds of styles and voices—from polemical to didactic to ironic—but students comment on the commonalities in language, the accessible vocabulary, the lack of jargon (or the judicious use of it, always defined), the frequent use of colloquial speech—always for rhetorical effect. Along with diction, they note the syntax of sentences—often not as complicated as they find in scholarly prose—and the short paragraphs (versus paragraphs that in scholarly writing can go on for a page).

This attention to style leads to experimentation: incorporating metaphor, varying sentence length, strategically shortening paragraphs. It also contributes to a heightened appreciation of revision and a commitment to it. “By the time I got
done with my piece,” one student said, “every sentence was changed. It does you no
good to hold onto your precious words.”

One thing I love about teaching this course—or the one focused more on scholar-
ly writing—is how easily, readily big topics emerge, topics central to the kind of
work the students envision for themselves. We might be talking in class about the
kind of evidence to provide, and that discussion balloons to the issue of authority,
of demonstrating expertise. Or we’re down to the level of the sentence, mixing long
sentences with short ones, or even the effective use of the semicolon or the dash, and
suddenly we’re talking about how someone wants to sound, to come across to a reader.

This concern about how one comes across has a lot to do with identity, a fun-
damental issue at this stage of a graduate student’s development. What kind of work
do I want to do? How can I sound at least a little bit distinctive while appropriating
the linguistic conventions of my discipline? Whom do I want to write for; how nar-
rrowly or broadly will I think of my audience or audiences? Who am I as a scholar?

Another gratifying element of the course is the crossover effect that always
emerges: These young scholars begin to apply the lessons learned in this class on
popular writing to their academic prose. I encourage a kind of bilingualism, the
continued development of facility with both scholarly writing and writing for non-
specialists. But there is playback, as well, from the opinion piece and magazine article
onto the writing students do for their disciplines.

They learn, for example, to present their argument quickly, tersely, without the
scaffolds of jargon, catchphrases, and a swarm of citations. This honing of language
can have a powerful effect on a writer’s conceptualization of the argument itself. What
exactly am I trying to say here? What is the problem I’m trying to solve? What is the
fundamental logic of my study? Writing the opinion piece, one student observed,
“helped me think deeply about my topic. It’s so easy to string a lot of fancy words
together that look really important, but don’t really have substance to them.”

I’ve been writing about the crossover from the opinion piece to scholarly writ-
ing, but the crossover works in both directions. Students gain a heightened sense
of the potential relevance of their work to issues of public concern. This awareness
can vitalize scholarship.

The fostering of a hybrid professional identity—the life lived both in specializa-
tion and in the public sphere—is something I think we as a society need to nurture.
The more opinion is grounded on rich experience and deep study, the better the
quality of our public discourse about the issues that matter to us.

***

Even as I am helping young scholars write the newspaper opinion piece, newspapers
themselves are in flux and being wrenched toward various blends with new media.
“How can you convey profundity,” a public relations friend of mine asks me, “through Twitter?” Though he used an extreme example with Twitter—the microblogging service where messages are limited to 140 characters—he was pressing a legitimate point. Am I preparing my students for a vanishing world? Is even the 600- to 700-word opinion piece becoming irrelevant?

Though my students are way savvier about new media than I am, I try to provide some guidance in writing for online outlets and in strategically blending image with text. Still, opinion pieces are published online, and many of the abilities students develop working on them carry over to newer genres: the rhetorical sensibility, the linguistic facility, the push toward conciseness.

It is hard for specialists to make their way in our complex and evolving media world. Lord knows, this world has handed me my fair share of rejections. But though difficult, it is not closed by any means, and the blogosphere offers its own wide range of options and entry points. One clear thing the history of technology shows us is that while a new technology does change things, sometimes dramatically, it also blends and morphs into existing technologies and social practices.

It is important then to keep in mind that various forms of media are not hermetic, not sealed off from each other. Many users shift from YouTube to a radio podcast, to Google Scholar, to a paperback recommended by a friend ... possibly on Facebook. And skills learned in one form can transfer to another, and hybrid forms can emerge. A generative interaction. Here are a few quick examples from my own experience.

I mentioned earlier the importance of being concise without sacrificing your core claim or argument. At about the same time I wrote my first opinion piece, I was also beginning to do radio interviews. One medium is print-based and static, the other oral and interactive, but each in its way pushed me to refine the ability to state a point quickly. Also, talk radio—especially those shows with call-ins—really helped me develop a richer, more concrete sense of the audience out there, of possible misunderstandings or elaborations of a claim of mine ... or counter-arguments to it. And this experience with real and unpredictable audiences was certainly valuable when I sat down to compose something for the unknown readers of the opinion page.

Long inept with all things computeresque, I recently entered the blogosphere, and, probably because I didn’t know better, I wrote in a traditional mode for this new medium. Millions of active blogs are out there, of all imaginable content and style, but few in the (admittedly) small sample I saw looked like what I had in mind.

Our national discussion of education has gotten terribly narrow, a discourse of economic competitiveness and test scores. So I wanted a blog that encouraged a more reflective, deliberative discussion of the purpose of education, and the essay more so than the typical blog post seemed the right genre. I wanted to use this new medium to write old-school, small essays about school. What is interesting is the degree to which the readers of the blog have responded in kind. Some of their comments are
paragraphs long, crafted and thoughtful. A community college instructor writes a meditation on teaching and the purpose of education: “I love to pull my teaching cart out into the dark, smelling all the trees and flowers that are now only shadows, knowing that I and my students are tired from doing something worthwhile.” Essayist literacy a mouse-click away from Twitter.

***

Rhetoric and composition is deeply connected to matters of broad public interest—literacy, teaching, undergraduate education—and for a while now, some within our field have been seeking public connection through service-learning, courses in civic rhetoric, or involvement in workplace and community literacy projects. There is talk of a “public turn” in composition studies, and several new journals are directly addressing public and community literacy. But the huge, clattering irony is that our field, a field that has rhetoric at its core, offers little or no graduate-level training for public writing or speaking. English and education don’t either. Yet many in rhetoric and composition (and in education) are yearning to speak to wider audiences, to insert our various bodies of knowledge and perspectives into the public record.

We academics easily develop a tin ear to the sound of our own language. We talk too much to each other, and not beyond. We risk linguistic, intellectual, and political isolation. Many good things have come of rhetoric and composition’s move toward disciplinary status. But with disciplinarity also comes a turn inward, a concentration on the mechanics of the profession, on internal debates and intellectual display, on a specific kind of career building—and it is all powerfully reinforced, materially and symbolically, by the academy.

There’s nothing wrong with watching out for one’s livelihood, of course not. And there’s real value in a tradition that demands intellectual scrutiny within ranks. But, as Lisa Ede smartly observed a while back, there is a tendency for disciplines, for us, to create, or at least amp up, our debates by reducing and reifying one another’s positions—then opposing them. This is the academic engine and, yes, it can contribute to more intense thinking. But it also keeps our attention focused on ourselves while all hell breaks loose in public policy and the broader public sphere.

I wonder how we might continue to turn outward through our disciplinary debates. How can we attend to both our field and the public domain . . . and find something generative in considering the two together?

The field of rhetoric and composition is grounded on the art of persuasion, is multidisciplinary, and has a foundational connection to teaching practice and education policy. It is the ideal place, as a number of people have been arguing lately, to imagine a different kind of disciplinary and institutional life.

We could begin in our graduate programs. Here’s one small suggestion. We
could offer training—through a course or some other curricular mechanism—in communicating to broader audiences, the doing of rhetoric. The training could include analysis of public policy and media to heighten sophistication about how they work and how one might find or create an entry point. And such training could also include rhetorical theory and history that enhances the understanding of such public intellectual work—I think here, as one example, of Jacqueline Jones Royster's Traces of a Stream, which offers a rich account of nineteenth-century African American women moving into and affecting public life with a rhetorically attuned public writing. Students would learn a lot about media and persuasion and the sometimes abstract notion of audience. And they would understand rhetoric, the rhetorical impulse and practice, in a way that is both grounded and fresh.  

Notes

1. These statistics come from two sources: Thomas E. Patterson's 1994 book Out of Order (160) and Erik P. Bucy and Maria Elizabeth Grabe's paper “Image Bite News” (20).


4. I would like to thank the following people for their comments on an earlier version of this essay: Richard Lee Colvin, Ellen Cushman, Casandra Harper, Linda Kao, Elham Kazemi, Rema Reynolds, and Kerri Ullucci.

Works Cited


