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Struggling to Understand Work and School: An Essay Review of *Back to School*

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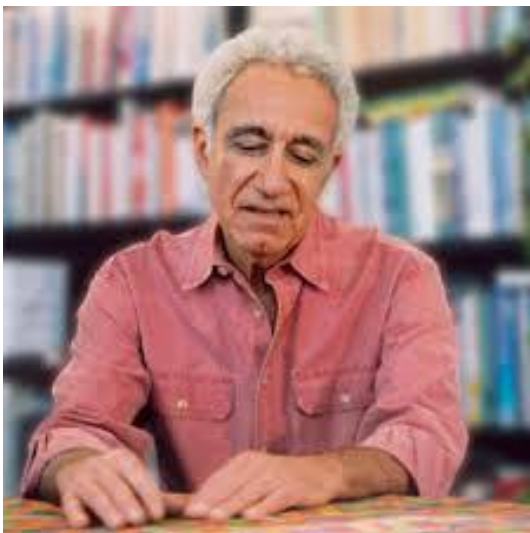
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If Bill Clinton agrees to blurb your book, I expect you would feel obligated to put it on the front cover, even if the message is misleading. “Mike Rose,” Clinton

pronounces, “shines a light on institutions that are teaching students, young and old, how to rebuild our economy and put America back to work.” The text that

follows from the first page is in fact an impassioned argument about why we need to move beyond this conventional “back to work” thinking about education. Rose laments the fact that debates about adult education almost always fixate on bottom-line considerations and quantitative outcome measures such as a program’s return-on-investment. “These days,” Rose says, “the economic rationale is the only one that has a prayer of swaying policy makers” (p.28).



Rose has got this right. Visit the White House website and the Higher Education home page features the following banner headline: *EDUCATION—Knowledge and Skills for the Jobs of the Future*. From President Obama on down the line, policy makers appear to believe that the only value of postsecondary education is that it offers a pathway to success in an increasingly competitive global labor market.

While Rose acknowledges the importance of education as a vehicle for social mobility, he insists that the economic rationale is just one compelling reason among many for why we should invest in adult education. We need,

Rose emphasizes, to think seriously about the civic and moral components of education as well. People not only enroll in college to go after a fatter paycheck but also “to feel their minds working and learn new things, to help their kids, to feel competent [and] to remedy a poor education” (p.141). Or, as one community college student tells Rose, to “discover somebody you never knew you were” (p.6).

Back to School makes a compelling case for the importance of what Mike Rose refers to as “second chance” education. Second chance education targets so-called “nontraditional students” and happens in places like “working class schools, blue collar job sites, adult schools, literacy programs and remedial classrooms,” (p.117) places that rarely figure in the national conversation about postsecondary education. While books about higher education are in no short supply, it’s the elite colleges and universities that get all of the press.

Rose does an enormous service by drawing attention to the nearly invisible world of remedial and vocational adult education. It is not a small world. More than four out of every ten undergraduate students attends a community college. Some 1,100 community colleges across the country serve a student population of around thirteen million. They are vital institutions, providing access to higher education for low-income, minority and first-generation college students, the latter making up more than forty percent of all community college students.

Except in an abstract statistical sense, there is no such thing as a typical nontraditional student. Representing a diverse cross-section of America, they are young and old; urban, suburban and rural; white and non-white. Among their ranks are ex-offenders, veterans, new immigrants and the recently laid-off.

If you read *Education Review*, you are all but guaranteed to have succeeded in school. Your progression from kindergarten to college was in all likelihood relatively smooth and steady, facilitated by positive encouragement from parents and teachers and punctuated by feelings of accomplishment. In contrast, for many of the adult students who go back to school, the classroom was a hostile place where they consistently struggled. For whatever reason—and there are lots of them, from the usual suspects of drugs and gangs to less high-profile problems such as undiagnosed learning disabilities and family dislocations—they did not succeed in school the first time around.

Back to School is based on Rose's personal experience teaching adults as well as on a kind of informal ethnographic study of postsecondary institutions (that is, Rose made repeat visits to different community colleges and adult education centers, taking the time to explore the buildings and grounds, soak up the campus atmosphere, sit in on classes and talk to students, teachers and administrators). Although he is a professor of education at UCLA, Rose writes more like a journalist than an academician, favoring anecdotes and

vignettes to illustrate his points. He has the knack of an experienced news writer for placing you on the scene. Inside a welding workshop, for example, we see the “sparks fly up from the workstations,” hear the “discordant symphony of welding’s pops and crackles” and confront the “strong, acrid smell of electrical heat [that] fills the air” (p.72).

Detailed and sympathetic portraits of individuals populate the different settings that Rose sketches. Henry is working towards his associate of arts degree. He is:

a stocky guy, broad across the chest, with powerful forearms from years in a wheelchair. He wears a baseball cap backward, a sweatshirt—both with the local team’s logo—fingerless gloves, baggy shorts and socks that come up to his knees. His face is vibrant with earnestness (p.1).

Rose’s up-close-and-personal narrative style is intended to offer an alternative to conventional statistical reports, which only proffer what he refers to as “one-dimensional policy fixes” (p.54). Numbers, Rose says, fill in only “part of the picture of complex human reality” (p.14) and cannot possibly capture things like the lightbulb moments that inspire somebody to return to school. Henry, for instance, excelled in his first two years of high school before taking a “wrong turn” (p.1) into gang life. A bullet, shot by a rival gang member, changed his life, piercing his spine and paralyzing him from the waist down. After concluding that he had no place on the streets, Henry

thought to himself: “I don’t have the use of my legs but I have the use of my mind” (p.3). He stumbled across the local community college website one night, got on the commuter train the next morning and decided to enroll “right there that day” (p.3).

After earning his certificate as a computer security specialist, Henry decided to take a few general education courses, including Sociology and History. Now applying to four-year universities, Henry would like to work in conflict resolution, helping “at-risk” youth who are “searching for an identity” (p.1). Rose introduces us to a half-dozen or so students who, like Henry, discover that postsecondary education is about a lot more than simply earning a credential to climb the income ladder. Adult education, in Rose’s view, does not only unlock the door to specialized job opportunities such as IT security; it can and should unlock all kinds of doors—to a career previously unforeseen, for example; or to a leadership position in a trade union, service on the local school board, participation in a political campaign and so on. Rose’s anecdotal style, however, is only so convincing on this point. No matter how gripping the personal stories, we need some numbers to be fully persuaded. If you are an adult who has pursued postsecondary education, are you more likely to be actively involved in the civic, religious and political life of your community? Rose leaves this vital empirical question unanswered.

I used to think of my adult education classrooms in Boston as a mini-United Nations. Rose notes that there aren’t very

many other places where people with such a remarkable “diversity of backgrounds and skills” (p.39) come together in a single room. *Alejandro, Amina, Naz, Thami, Zawiya and Zheng*. A simple recitation of some of my students’ first names illuminates the global diversity present in my classes (the aforementioned students came from the Dominican Republic, Somalia, Turkey, Morocco, Ethiopia and China, respectively).

One of the most important lessons I took away from my two-year stint teaching math, literacy and ESOL to adults from all over the world was that school itself is a kind of skill. There are implicit rules and routines that govern what happens in school (showing up on time, sitting quietly, listening to the teacher and so on). These rules and routines are not at all self-evident to students with little to no experience with formal schooling (on the first day that a young Somali woman attended my basic literacy class, she unfurled her prayer rug next to the chalkboard during class and began to pray. I paused momentarily and then plunged ahead with my lesson).

While most adult students have no problem picking up on standard classroom protocols, they often struggle mightily to master the set of metacognitive skills necessary to succeed in school. This set of essential skills includes things like time-management, goal-setting and note-taking. As Rose reports, some of his students’ textbooks “didn’t have a mark on the pages while other students were highlighting three-quarters of nearly every page” (p.158).

Schools are complex bureaucracies and students need to have the institutional knowledge, organizational skills and self-confidence to make sound decisions about everything from financial aid offers to course distribution requirements (Rose notes that a surprisingly large number of institutions number their remedial courses out of sequence such that, say, English 302 should really be taken before English 201).

Rose devotes almost an entire chapter (Chapter 6: The People's College) to offering sensible and, in most cases, immediately applicable measures that would make community colleges more welcoming, user-friendly and effective. These measures range from increasing the meaningful points of contact between students and the institution to modeling successful study strategies. A single instructor, Rose points out, can pursue any number of relatively easy tactics to enhance the student experience. She might, for example, hold mandatory office hours in order for her students to become more comfortable speaking with faculty members. Or, to boost students' study skills, she might give students real examples of exemplary and lackluster notes and ask them to highlight what the key differences are between them. Rose's overarching goal along these lines is to make all of the requisite "help-seeking" strategies and metacognitive skills associated with doing school as transparent and accessible as possible.

Remedial courses, especially in writing, serve as gateway classes to the standard college-level curriculum (they frequently

count only as prerequisites and do not carry regular course credits). Suffering from a longstanding and pernicious "academic snobbery," remedial education, Rose observes, languishes in the "hinterlands of higher education" (p.186). He points to a long history of disparaging terms for remedial students, from the "shirker" and the "dullard" to the "immature" and the "socially maladjusted." Echoing the medical discourse, remedial students are said to have "handicaps," "disabilities" and "deficits" that need to be targeted and treated. The image of the remedial student, Rose underscores, has always been tainted by destructive social Darwinist assumptions about race and class—that is, the poor, immigrant and minority students who have made up the bulk of the remedial student population simply do not have the brains or the work ethic to succeed academically.

Whatever label remedial students are tagged with, they are frequently perceived as apathetic, undisciplined and slow. As a consequence, we tend to blame the shortcomings of remedial students on their own individual failings and character defects rather than on institutional failures or difficult life circumstances. While we peg the man who nods off in one of our classes as lazy and disrespectful, Rose reminds us that he may very well have come straight to school from the graveyard shift (according to one recent report, upwards of 85% of community college students hold jobs).

Because remedial students have such severe cognitive deficits, so the conventional wisdom goes, the remedial curriculum has to

be dumbed-down to meet their level (for as long as Rose can remember, remedial English has been known informally as “Bonehead English”). Remedial education, according to Rose, clings to “bankrupt assumptions about teaching and learning that profoundly limit its effectiveness” (p.186?). One of these assumptions is that material must be stripped down to its most basic and elemental form in order for students to understand it. This results in a “skills and drills” curriculum that Rose aptly characterizes as limited to “narrow, mechanical pursuits stripped of fuller meaning” (p.126). This was certainly the case in my experience teaching adult basic literacy. The available textbooks were awful. They taught reading as if it were only a matter of decoding sounds and writing as if spelling and grammar were the only things that counted. This was literacy with neither meaning nor purpose.

For Rose, the answer to this quandary is to inject genuine intellectual content into remedial courses. In remedial writing courses, for example, we need to dispatch with the notion that good writing is simply a matter of technical proficiency. Basic writing instruction, Rose emphasizes, should attempt to “explain the origins and purposes of the conventions of literacy” (p.129). This effort includes grammar and punctuation, to be sure, but it also includes discussion about complex ideas such as genre. Rose says that he wanted to change the model of writing that students had in their heads:

I wanted them to begin to conceive of writing as a way to think

something through and give order to those thoughts. I wanted them to understand writing as persuasion, to get the feel for writing *to* someone, a feel for audience. And I wanted them to revise their writing process, which for most of them was a one-draft affair typically done the night before or the morning an assignment was due...I wanted them to see that good writing was more than correct writing (pp.137-8).

What goes for remedial education should also go for vocational education, the other critical domain inhabited by adult students. The immediate goal should be to augment the intellectual content. “Imagine,” Rose says, “how the house or the automobile or the computer could be the core of a rich, integrated curriculum: one that includes social and technical history, science and economics and hands-on assembly and repair” (p.172). The quest for a powerful vocational center of gravity around which all of the academic school subjects might revolve has been a staple of the progressive education vision for well over a century now. As early as 1900, the philosopher and soon-to-be progressive education icon John Dewey professed his faith in the power of occupations such as weaving to integrate an otherwise dull and disjointed curriculum. Name a subject—history, physics, social studies, geography, economics—and Dewey would explain how it connects in an organic and illuminating way to weaving. “You can concentrate,” he declared, “the history of all mankind into the evolution of the flax,

cotton and wool fibers into clothing” (Dewey, p.22).

According to Dewey, by exploring the historical, social, economic and scientific significance of an occupation, “it ceases to be a pleasant occupation merely and becomes more and more a medium, an instrument, an organ of understanding—and is thereby transformed” (Dewey, p.22).

That Dewey seems to be describing an almost alchemical process is no accident. As historians of American education have demonstrated, it turns out to be enormously time-consuming and difficult for teachers to consistently deliver high quality instruction in the Dewey vein. Consider the daunting challenge facing the history teacher tasked with planning Rose’s “integrated curriculum.” He would have to design one history course for the future welders, another for the future mechanics and still a different one for the future carpenters, *ad nauseum*. The curriculum is not a standard, pre-determined sequence of content but rather an amorphous and shape-shifting body of knowledge that must be alive to changing circumstances. Achieving this elusive ideal has always been the most formidable challenge posed by progressive education at any level.

Rose’s notion of an “integrated curriculum” that combines technical and scholastic elements is one way that he attempts to address what he considers a central dilemma of adult education, namely that of how to bridge the academic-vocational divide. While I applaud Rose’s call to ramp up the intellectual content of vocational courses,

his far more ambitious attempt to reframe how we perceive blue-collar work may be a bridge too far. Rose maintains that there’s “a level and variety of mental activity involved in doing physical work that is largely unacknowledged, even invisible” (p.133). Here is Rose waxing poetic about the “significant intellectual work” involved in welding: “Touch and concept blend in activity... Suddenly, attention is focused and all kinds of knowledge rush in on the moment, right through the fingertips” (p.132).

If Rose’s ultimate goal is to improve the quality of education for nontraditional students, his move to transform manual labor into an intellectually rigorous and rewarding pursuit is a misguided strategy. He tries to elevate manual work by claiming that it is cognitively demanding; in other words, by hitching brainpower to manpower. While Rose is a fierce critic of all of the status hierarchies that flow from the basic division of “reason” from “experience” (the “mind” versus the “body”; the “pure” versus the “applied”; the “liberal” versus the “occupational”; and the like), his assertion that manual work is cognitively rich implicitly buys into and reinforces the prestige of intellect. Rose is basically grabbing us by the lapels and saying: hey look! Blue-collar work includes the kind of challenging, higher-order academic thinking that we have always privileged.

I have no doubt that manual work almost always demands problem solving and troubleshooting. But to suggest, as Rose does, that hairstyling requires as much

background knowledge and technical skill as heart-surgery is, frankly, preposterous. Why can't manual labor be appreciated on its own terms? One can appreciate the craftsmanship—even beauty—of a fine weld without asserting, as Rose does, that the welder must have thought long and hard about the speed and angle of his welding tool. This is like saying that every Roger Federer ace is informed by his expert knowledge of physics. The intellectual side of physical work happens in the planning and assessment stages, when you take a step back from the work itself. We should be content to recognize and acknowledge the practical expertise, hard won by thousands of hours of practice, of blue-collar workers such as welders, plumbers and carpenters. We don't have to pretend everything that they do is executed, in Rose's words, at "full cognitive throttle" (p.67). If we do, we may forget the pressing need that adult students have for the kind of broad critical thinking skills that will advance and enrich their lives *off* the jobsite.

Rather than expending so much energy attempting to convince us that manual work is also intellectual work, Rose should have taken more time to explain how to encourage what he calls "vocationally-oriented explosions of the mind" (p.77). As Rose describes it, a student called Elias had this kind of transformative experience when he discovered the utility and beauty of Mathematics through his participation in a welding certification program. His story illustrates an important point: the key to invigorating education for nontraditional students is not by artificially elevating the

status of the work that they usually do but rather by fostering more respect for the minds that they have. These are minds, as Rose underscores, that can ignite like any others—the vital question then becomes how to "enhance the liberal studies possibilities in a vocational curriculum" (p.63). Rose provides a few tentative answers—such as using vocations as the springboard into the standard academic curriculum—but without a more detailed and complete blueprint, we are left with a quixotic vision of an educational system that would somehow transcend the "Cartesian separation between body and mind" (p.132).

Rose concludes *Back to School* by calling for a more "general diffusion of knowledge" (p.192) among the American population (the book's subtitle is "An Argument for Democratizing Knowledge in America"). While Rose mentions that this "diffusion of knowledge" idea was frequently invoked in the first several decades following the American Revolution, he neglects to tell us who coined the phrase. Thomas Jefferson twice submitted legislation called "A Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge" to the Virginia State legislature (once in 1778 and then again in 1780). Although it never passed, Jefferson's bill provided a template for a publicly funded education system and sketched the outlines of an educational meritocracy.

Anybody who was talented enough should be able to pursue schooling "without regard to wealth, birth or other accidental condition or circumstance," Jefferson said (Ford, p.415). The idea, as Jefferson wrote

elsewhere, was to “rake from the rubbish annually” those promising girls and boys who would be eligible to receive tuition-free schooling (Ferling, p.159). Jefferson envisioned an educational pyramid in which a select group of boys would progress from elementary to advanced studies, culminating with a chosen few who would attend the College of William and Mary on a state scholarship. The classical curriculum that Jefferson proposed was heavily weighted toward Greek, Roman, English, and American history and was meant to prepare students to safeguard “the sacred deposit of the rights and liberties of their fellow citizens” (Ford, p.415).

Jefferson’s “diffusion of knowledge” model of education is very different indeed from that proposed by Rose. In Jefferson’s conception, the best and brightest students, no matter their background, would be able to work their way up the ranks to join a “natural aristocracy” of “virtue and talents”—the promise was that the children of farmers and artisans could become statesmen (Ferling, p.159). Rose, on the other hand, is profoundly suspicious of pyramids, hierarchies and limited windows of opportunity. His ideal educational system would erase the sharp distinctions between the world of work and the life of the mind; and it would be structured to offer legitimate second chances to those students who struggled the first time around. You cannot put down *Back to School* without concluding that these students deserve a second chance; and that we need to devote more energy to making the opportunities afforded by adult

education as productive, stimulating and horizon-expanding as possible.

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