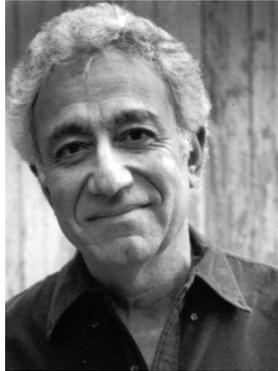


Going Back to School: An Interview with Mike Rose

By Peter Adams

Seeking academic help can clash with the common belief in western society that learning is an individual process



Mike Rose is a professor in the UCLA Graduate School of Education and Information Studies. He has taught in a wide range of educational settings—from elementary school to adult literacy and job training programs—and has

*directed an EOP tutorial center. He is a member of the National Academy of Education and a Founding Fellow of the Council of Learning Assistance and Developmental Education Associations. His books include **Lives on the Boundary: The Struggles and Achievements of America's Educationally Underprepared**, **Possible Lives: The Promise of Public Education in America**, **The Mind at Work: Valuing the Intelligence of the American Worker**, **Why School?: Reclaiming Education for All of Us**, and **Back to School: Why Everyone Deserves a Second Chance at Education**.*

Peter Adams (P.A.): Your own background mirrors the backgrounds of many students in developmental education. Your parents were immigrants, you grew up working class, and you were a first-generation college-goer. What have you learned from your own experience that might carry over to the work of the developmental educator?

Mike Rose (M.R.): Well, I certainly understand the feeling of not belonging, of being a stranger in a strange land. This feeling is intensified if you're going to a school where many of your peers don't look and sound like you.

I have a sense of what it's like to not know much about how college works: from lacking knowledge and strategies for selecting courses to being overwhelmed by the intricacies of financial aid. And I understand the unfamiliarity with resources and, maybe more to the point, the reluctance to use them. A lot of people who come from backgrounds like mine aren't savvy about the need to connect with instructors, to go to office hours if they're available, and to utilize tutorial and

learning centers. Such behaviors, even if you're familiar with them, can feel like an admission of stupidity or a sign of weakness.

A more complicated wrinkle here is that seeking academic help can clash with the common belief in western society that learning is an individual process, that we've got to bear down harder, discipline ourselves better; and if we still can't get the material, well, then, there's the proof of what we always suspected...we're not smart enough for college. Getting students to see that learning is both an individual and social act can be a huge breakthrough.

Perhaps because of my background, I've always seen the developmental course as being more than a skill-building course. Yes, absolutely, the developmental educator is helping students read or write better or be more mathematically competent. But I also think that the developmental program, when it's well-executed, is one of the few places where people learn how to be students, how to use resources, and how to study and manage time. The good developmental instructor also helps students explore some of their counter-productive ideas and feelings about literacy; mathematics; or about themselves, their ability, and what might be possible for them.

P.A.: In the 27 years since you published *Lives on the Boundary*, you've written or edited 12 more books. How does *Back to School*, fit into your body of work? What have been the major themes that have tied your work together?

M.R.: Let me start by summing up *Back to School* and working backwards. This is a book about the huge and growing number of students who are coming to school these days, from those in their early 20s to people who haven't been in a classroom in decades. These folks include students pursuing a GED, an occupational certificate, an Associate's degree, or who are preparing to transfer to a four-year college. A number of people graciously let me into their lives, so readers of *Back to School* meet and come to know students with a wide range of backgrounds and goals, from young people who are for the first time seeing purpose in school; to people with a history in the criminal justice

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system; to 30- and 40-year-olds seeking substantial employment through a skilled trade; to women who have raised families and are setting out on the next phase of their lives; to burgeoning physicists, psychologists, and teachers.

The aspirations and struggles of this richly varied population reflect the themes that characterize all my work: social class and educational opportunity, academic underpreparation and achievement, the nature of intelligence, and the role of teaching in a democracy.

P.A.: From President Obama to the local radio talk show, the focus of the current national discussion about getting more low-income people into college has to do with economic benefit, both for the individual and for the nation. Given your work, do you have evidence of other benefits as well?

M.R.: Of course people go to college to improve their economic prospects, and this is doubly true for low-income students. I think of a guy introducing himself on the first day of a community college occupational program. He said bluntly, "I don't want to work a crappy job all my life." But if you spend time with even the most job-oriented students, you began to see all sorts of other motives and goals emerge. One of the things I try to do in *Back to School* is give a fuller picture of students who typically get portrayed in pretty simplified ways in both public policy and media.

Students want to find work that not only brings in a paycheck but that also has meaning for them. They like learning new things, from new tools and techniques to an understanding of other cultures. (I remember a man in his forties in a computer-assisted manufacturing course saying enthusiastically how good it felt "to have my mind working again.") Students who have families talk about wanting to help their kids with school and hoping to be a role model for them. I'm struck, too, by the number of people I've met over the years and certainly while researching *Back to School* who embrace education as a way to define or redefine who they are: the young man who hated school beginning to see himself as a student and thinker, the woman who raised a family returning to school to pursue a goal she put aside decades earlier, or students who end up in STEM because a required introductory science class captivated them.

Students are driven by economic motives. We all are. But if economics is the sole lens through which we observe students, we'll miss so much else.

P.A.: *Back to School* contains plenty of facts and policy recommendations, but what makes it different from other current books on higher education is the stories you tell about students and teachers. In fact, many of the facts and policy recommendations

are embedded in these stories. Why did you choose to write the book this way?

M.R.: Long ago, I decided I wanted to write not only for other educators but also for students and for a wider public. I think it's possible to be rigorous and analytic and also to tell a good story. After all, the people and situations educational researchers write about are alive and vibrant and richly complex. So I'd argue that to really capture the world of education, you need to give your facts and figures in their full human context.

In *Back to School*, for example, I try to argue for the intellectual content of occupational education by taking readers into the welding shop and having us watch closely what these novice welders are learning how to do. As we watch them, I can weave in the implications for curriculum development and educational policy. Or in offering the stats about enrollment in developmental courses, completion rates, and correlations with social class,

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I try to make the numbers come alive by putting the reader in the seats of developmental ed classrooms, meeting the students there and giving a sense of their educational histories and current social and economic circumstances.

P.A.: A major theme in *Back to School* is that we need to "rethink the divide between the academic and vocational courses of study," and in Chapter 3, you introduce us to Cynthia, Bobby, and Elias, each of whom is pursuing a welding certificate. The three of them are learning the challenging skills of their trade, but Bobby is also exploring art history, Elias is interested in math, and Cynthia is running for student government. And each of them is also pursuing an Associate's degree. Each seems to have bridged the divide between occupational and vocational courses of study. Could you talk a little more about what colleges need to do to make the kind of experience Cynthia, Bobby, and Elias are having available to more students? What kinds of structural or programmatic changes would help to close this divide?

M.R.: One of the big mistakes we've made in education over the last 100 years is creating the sharp divide between the academic and the vocational course of study. That divide has limited our understanding of the intellectual content of vocational

knowledge and led to a tamping down of that content in the vocational curriculum. A parallel problem is that we've developed a stereotype of the vocational student as someone not interested in the ideas one might find in the academic curriculum. Let me tell you a story.

Several years ago, I sat in on a required humanities course where most of the students were in the construction trades. The class was assigned several essays that dealt with education, sociology, and economics – topics that would seem pertinent to this group since they are currently in school, participate in multiple social groups, and are living through the effects of the economy on a daily basis. But the discussion went nowhere. Most of the students were disengaged, and the instructor was treading water. Fortunately, he had brought in a guest speaker that day, and soon the guest took over. He was in education but, it turned out, had grown up in the neighborhood of the college and was a descendant of people who had worked in the manufacturing and service industries. He began by talking about his background and tied it to some of the topics in the essays. Then he asked the students to describe their high schools, and he pointed out connections with the essays. As the class proceeded, it became clear that the students had a lot to say about the themes in the readings, about economics and inequality, about race and social class, and about the goals of education. As the readers of this journal know better than anyone, it all depends on how academic material is presented.

You ask about structural or programmatic changes that can help close the academic-vocational divide. One approach I like that's been around for a while is integrating literacy and numeracy instruction into a vocational course, these days referred to as contextualized learning. You mention Elias. This is a guy who dropped out of high school possessing a pretty rudimentary knowledge of arithmetic but got turned on to math when it was taught in the context of his welding courses. Math made sense to him and mattered to him.

Another approach is represented in the story I told you about the humanities course. Without compromising the essential content or foundational concepts of a discipline, how can we present material in the humanities, arts, or sciences in ways that connect to occupational students' lives? Their working lives are or will be embedded in economics and politics. They daily encounter chemistry or physics or biology. Their work has a historical tradition and a code of ethical behavior. For many of them, aesthetic concerns are integral to their practice. And on, and on...

Both approaches I just mentioned require collaborative work among faculty and strong professional development. I don't want for a minute to downplay how hard such work is, though when it clicks, it can be deeply rewarding. But, in addition

to planning and developing both curriculum and pedagogical chops, there's something else required to bridge this academic-vocational divide. I think it's the big thing. Faculty and their leadership need to think deeply about the received beliefs and entrenched practices at their institutions that reinforce the split between the academic and the vocational. Until the key players do this basic work, they won't be able to substantially bridge the divide.

P. A.: Could you give an example or two of these "received beliefs" and "entrenched practices" that reinforce the split between the academic and the vocational?

M. R.: Sure, the beliefs are those I've been discussing and that we receive from the culture at large. For example, work of the hand requires dexterity, determination, trial and error practice, and learning of new techniques but does not involve abstraction, conceptualizing, theoretical understanding, and the like. Or the kinds of stereotyped beliefs about vocational students' interests I illustrated with that classroom story are another example.

As for entrenched practices, consider all the ways that the academic-vocational split has been institutionalized. Separate departments and turf and power dynamics. Separate faculty lines and, possibly, pay schedules. Separate administrative structures and routines. These structures and practices are hard to negotiate and can be a formidable barrier to, let's say, getting faculty from the social sciences and construction trades to come together to creatively plan for a contextualized learning program.

P. A.: Developmental education is itself the focus of both criticism and reform. Critics like Stan Jones of Complete College America have even called traditional developmental education a failure. Others within developmental education have been experimenting with alternative structures and pedagogies. What do you think about these critiques and reforms?

M. R.: First of all, I'm suspicious of sweeping indictments. Students' success or failure in developmental education depends on a host of factors. What skill levels do students possess upon entrance? Did they once know the material but have grown rusty or have they always had trouble? What is the curriculum they're given? What kind of instructional and tutorial support is available to them? What other things might they be learning—study skills, habits of mind—that typically don't get measured? These and other variables would affect a student's or a program's success.

But I and a lot of others in and outside of the developmental education world also think that some long-standing practices and beliefs work

against students' success; and, for that fact, against our success as teachers. I've been thinking and writing about these beliefs and practices for close to 35 years and sum up that work in *Back to School*. In brief, the segmenting of skill levels into three or four courses can keep some students climbing a seemingly endless ladder of classes, sometimes in several subject areas. There is good evidence that a significant number of them never make it out of the sequence. The curriculum in many of these courses is based on outdated theories of how students learn. And the assumptions about the ability and motivation of underprepared students that accompany these outdated theories of learning are a problem as well. Surely there are students who are drifting through our classes who lack discipline and focus. But just as often these folks are anxious, or don't know how to seek help, or are distracted by worries about food and shelter. Suddenly the country is aware of the surprising degree of food insecurity on our campuses. Again, I go into a lot more depth in *Back to School* and offer some

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of my own experience teaching and developing programs.

I am really excited about all the fresh work being done by developmental educators. I'm a big fan of contextualized learning, which I mentioned in response to your last question. And I'm also taken with the kind of thing you're doing in Baltimore, enrolling developmental students directly in first-year composition and then having them take their developmental course as a co-requisite. And then there are the attempts to beef up curriculum with more substantial material and assignments. All of these approaches require fewer courses in the developmental sequence.

What is crucial is that the reforms need to be more than just structural. For example, cutting one or two courses out of a developmental sequence without rethinking beliefs about learning and fundamentally redesigning curriculum will not get us to where we need to be. So, difficult as it is to initiate change at more than one level of an organization, program administrators and program faculty have to coordinate their efforts at reform if our students are to truly benefit. I also

hope that the considerable cognitive work involved in this rethinking of developmental ed leads us to affirm the serious intellectual content of what we do. There is nothing basic about teaching basic skills.

P. A.: In the conclusion to *Back to School*, you observe that for those teaching basic skills, "the need for substantial professional development is overwhelming." Why aren't faculty who will be teaching basic skills prepared to do so in graduate school? Have you observed "substantial professional development" that is effective? What does it look like?

M. R.: You're sure right that the problem begins in the graduate programs where college instructors are trained; and the problem is not just with basic skills instruction but with teaching in general. Graduate students learn a great deal about, let's say, biology or literature or mathematics, but not how to teach it. And there is no place in their curriculum where they consider the difficulties students might have as they learn how to think like a biologist or mathematician or the reading and writing difficulties that can emerge when encountering a discipline for the first time. The same is true in acquiring a trade. People are trained to be diesel mechanics or cosmetologists or nurses but not to teach their occupations. There are specialized master's programs that are oriented toward teaching, but they are not the norm.

Everything I just said is doubly, triply true for basic skills instructors, except for a handful of programs in English or mathematics. So the burden for developing teaching competence falls on the institutions hiring new faculty. And let's be honest, a lot of those institutions aren't that committed to teaching either. Some campuses have programs that provide resources for instruction, but they tend to be low-status and underutilized operations. As a community college vice president I interview in *Back to School* puts it, "We don't cultivate a professional identity around teaching." It's in the midst of this mess that we need to consider good professional development for basic skills instruction. More than the name of a specific place, I can give you some of the characteristics I think should be part of the mix.

Professional development cannot be a one-shot deal. It is not an inoculation. It needs to be ongoing, with multiple opportunities for instructors to learn new things, try them, and discuss and reflect on them, which can be done physically or virtually. Also we need to provide these opportunities to adjunct faculty, for they are responsible for so much instruction. It needs to be grounded on one's subject matter. A lot of professional development is awful. A consultant helicopters in and delivers trendy gimmicks or a simplified motivational rap

on teaching. The best professional development is done by and with people who are expert in the subject area and have worked long and hard at helping underprepared students become more literate or numerate. One more thing. Even if we're dealing with pretty basic skills—prealgebra arithmetic, let's say—that doesn't mean that the work can't be conceptually rich. So the best professional development is intellectually engaging, dealing with important fundamental issues in literacy or numeracy, cognition, and adult learning.

Finally, the best professional development I'm aware of taps local talent, big time. You may well involve a researcher who studies these issues or basic skills faculty who have developed successful programs elsewhere, but you'll also want to involve the people from your or neighboring campuses who are strong developmental ed teachers. Some of the most successful programs I've heard about are created and run by home-grown folk.

P.A.: Thinking back over this interview, it strikes me that you've been asking a lot of developmental education. You ask for faculty to do things they weren't trained to do, from teach study skills to collaborate with faculty from other subject areas with the goal of teaching reading, writing, or math in the context of those subject areas. And you're asking departments to mount ambitious professional development programs. All this in an environment of tight budgets, heavy teaching loads, and over-reliance on adjunct faculty. Do you have any hope that what you propose can come to pass?

M.R.: It does sound daunting. And I'm certainly not optimistic that funding will soon increase to equitable levels or that developmental educators' workloads will become sane and just. But everything I present in *Back to School* and that we've been discussing in this interview is taking place now. Not widespread, to be sure, and not easily accomplished, but things people are doing. So how do these folks do what they do in this constrained and difficult environment?

Administrators who are supportive of developmental education and are politically shrewd reallocate existing funds, or craft effective appeals for budget augmentation, or target local businesses and philanthropies. And as I mentioned a moment ago, there is a ground swell of work by faculty and staff who are experimenting with new curricula and course structures. My home state of California with its hundred-plus community colleges is rich in such experimentation, which includes hitting up those small family foundations and local businesses as well as forming political networks to influence policy makers.

Adjunct instructors are in such a precarious position. They have little time to do much more than teach their classes and then head for their next

job, and, even if they did have time, some departments don't include them in faculty enrichment or development. But some wise departments do, and most of the adjunct instructors I've spoken to welcome the opportunity to participate in good faculty development because it helps them improve their pedagogical skills and can potentially give them some advantage in the job market.

As for the tasks I've recommended adding to the developmental instructor's repertoire, some would clearly require quality professional development. But other tasks such as managing one's time or the effective use of the textbook might only need—at least for starters—the instructor asking of her or himself the fundamental question: What basics does a student need to know to participate in my class? The instructor can cover these topics incrementally and in the context of other important activities such as going over the syllabus, giving an assignment, or reviewing course material. This incremental coverage becomes less of a burdensome add-on, and I think is more effective because

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skills are strategically linked to activities that have consequences for students.

Your question about my expectations for developmental education takes me to a bigger point, Peter. For all my criticism of traditional developmental or remedial curriculum and pedagogy, I think that developmental education itself serves a powerful democratic purpose in American education. It provides a specified, institutionalized place in the college where the teaching and growth of academically underprepared students is front and center. At its best, developmental education helps correct for our educational system's and our society's failures. So I think there are civic and moral reasons as well as educational ones to keep advocating for more equitable funding and improved working conditions while we also push ourselves—as so many within the field are doing—to examine and improve what we teach and how we teach it.



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