Further Thoughts on *Back to School*

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First let me thank both Jeffrey Aaron Snyder and Kenneth J. Bernstein for their thorough, thoughtful, and exceedingly generous reviews. And thanks, as well, to the editors of *Education Review* for their invitation to respond and continue the discussion.

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Let me begin by picking up a point both Jeffrey and Ken make: that a central theme of *Back to School* is the call for a rich philosophy of education, one that includes the economic rationale for schooling, but gives equal weight to the intellectual, civic, moral, and aesthetic motives as well. As Jeffrey points out, the home page for the federal Department of Education announces *Education: Knowledge and Skills for the Jobs of the Future*. This near-exclusive economic focus has been with us for decades, and my concern is that it restricts our conception of education and, therefore, affects teaching, the content of curriculum, and our definition of what it means to be an educated person.

There have been times in our past when education was defined in broader terms, when the moral and civic purposes were emphasized, or intellectual and social development. So in some ways, I am looking to reclaim a rich tradition of educational discourse. But I’m seeking something new as well, for I think it is rare in our history that we have framed and articulated that fuller philosophy *in a way that includes everyone*. That is our challenge today. Can we articulate a capacious philosophy of education that, for example, supports and provides guidance to courses in remedial English and math or to occupational programs and that is relevant to students primed for college as well as students in a GED program? I’ve tried to sketch a framework for such an understanding of education both in *Why School?* and *Back to School*, but I’m not a philosopher of education and could present only brush strokes of ideas.

Now to a more particular point that emerges out of this discussion. Ken quotes a paragraph from *Back to School* in which I call for this richer philosophy, and comments that I lay out a “moral frame” with which to view the issues covered in the book. I’m pleased that Ken sees what I’m doing in moral terms, and want to say a little more about this moral perspective, particularly about the relation of the moral and the cognitive.

Our economically focused national discourse does not reveal the moral weight of teaching people how to read and write, or do mathematics, or understand science and economics and philosophy, especially if historically these people haven’t had the benefits of good teaching.
“Teaching children to read,” writes political philosopher Michael Walzer, “is, after all, an egalitarian business.” I’m reminded of one of the principals I interviewed for Possible Lives, Haven Henderson, reflecting on the demanding work she did in East Harlem. She and her colleagues’ students “would look at us in disbelief when we told them they were intellectuals. They hadn’t had much in their school experience to let them know they could be successful.” To take students of any age seriously as intellectual beings, to affirm their ability to learn, to push and guide them — commit to them, really — is a deeply moral act.

We don’t hear these terms — the cognitive and the moral — used together in discussions of education. Part of the problem I think is that cognition has de facto been so narrowly defined in education policy: the cognitive becomes that which is measured by standardized tests. (I cover this issue more fully in an Education Week commentary, Giving Cognition a Bad Name, May 29, 2013, which is available on the web at http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2013/01/16/17rose_ep.h32.html). In addition to appreciating the moral dimension of teaching, we need to reclaim a richer definition of cognition as we shape a broader philosophy of education for our time.

The last point I want to make ties in with the first two, and that is the need to explore and make manifest the cognitive content of physical work and fundamentally rethink the separation both in practice and in conceptualization of the academic and the vocational course of study. The kind of rich democratic philosophy of education I seek will not be possible without such rethinking.

I bring this issue up in several chapters of Back to School, but one section (primarily page 132) particularly bothered Jeffrey. I think his reading of that section misrepresents my argument, though I am aware that his reading emerges from problems with my writing, for I maladroitly condensed a more detailed argument from The Mind at Work. Let me now try to present the gist of the argument.

Jeffrey is right, I do want to “reframe how we perceive blue-collar work.” Physical and service work has a cognitive dimension to it, from the problem-solving and troubleshooting of the mechanic, to the hairstylist’s applying and modifying of a knowledge base, to, for that
fact, the strategizing it takes to get a refrigerator up a narrow stairway. As people are learning these different activities, there is considerable thinking going on, and self-monitoring, and revising of technique. And as people become more competent they, of course, perform these activities adroitly and routinely. But as everyone I studied noted—from carpenters to surgeons—mind is always present, a kind of low-voltage awareness that amps up dramatically when something unroutine happens, when something goes wrong. There is much to say here—a fuller argument, many more examples—and the interested reader can consult *The Mind at Work*. But the basic point I want to make is that as evident as the above is, there is a very long tradition in Western intellectual and cultural history, beginning with the Classical Greeks, that can blind us to it. Dewey was brilliant in his critique of this tradition. Furthermore, in our era of high-tech triumphs, TED talks, endless opining about the nature of the new economy and 21st century skills, it is doubly easy to fall into the trap of discounting the thought involved in physical work. One particularly irritating trope is the characterizing of “old economy” work such as manufacturing as “neck down” versus the “neck up” work of the “new economy.” That discounting negatively affects occupational status, the development of educational and training programs, power dynamics within schools, and the distribution of opportunity.

Let me address Jeffrey’s criticism. I am not trying to “transform manual labor into an intellectually rigorous and rewarding pursuit” nor do I believe that “hairstyling requires as much background knowledge and technical skill as heart surgery.” As Jeffrey notes, that would be “preposterous.” All I’m trying to do is reclaim (I seem to be doing a lot of reclaiming in this essay) for blue-collar and service work the cognitive content that has always been a part of it. To affirm that cognitive content is not in any way to discount the value of the liberal arts, but, rather, to, first, give workers back their heads, as one labor journalist aptly put it, and, second, to encourage the admittedly hard task (Jeffrey is right, this is hard) of finding intersection among the institutionalized silos of the curriculum.

After many years of neglect, the populations I write about in *Back to School* are a focus of public policy. President
Obama gives more than a few of his speeches at community colleges, and there are important national and regional initiatives to improve the pathway from GED to post-secondary education, the quality of college remediation, the integration of academic and vocational courses, the accessibility of financial aid, community college retention and transfer rates, and more. But I do think there is conceptual work that needs to be done as well, a rethinking of frameworks and assumptions about the meaning and goals of education, about intelligence and ability, and about the academic-vocational divide. Otherwise, we run the risk of changing specific courses and programs (such as the typical sequence of remedial courses or adding mathematics or literacy modules to vocational courses) but not the deep conceptual structure beneath — which is what finally drives the way institutions run.

About the Author

Mike Rose has made significant contributions to the study of literacy and for his insights into the struggles of working-class America. Currently, Rose is Professor of Social Research Methodology in the UCLA Graduate School of Education and Information Studies. He is a graduate of Loyola University (BA), the University of Southern California (MS), and the University of California, Los Angeles (MA and PhD).