

“Just as I have a mind”: Mike Rose and the Intelligence of Ordinary People

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*This essay looks at the social democratic roots of Mike Rose’s belief in the intelligence of ordinary people and the educability of poor and working-class kids currently bypassed by the education system. His later work, especially *The Mind at Work*, challenges the narrowing effects of the division of mental and manual labor in class society, imagining instead the inventive interplay of mind, heart, and hand.*

Mike Rose was a social democrat in the finest lower-case, non-doctrinaire sense of the term. He was an educational reformer, like Horace Mann and John Dewey, who championed the public education of an active citizenry. Like Walt Whitman, Mike believed in the infinite potential of the common people, the democratic vistas and practical intelligence of the popular classes. And like the English arts-and-crafts socialist William Morris, Mike was a visionary who imagined the inventive interplay of mind, heart, and hand; thought and action; aesthetics and labor.

What animated Mike was the injustice of a class society that excludes ordinary men and women from elite forms of knowledge, limits their participation in public life, and squanders their latent abilities and talents. His mission, accordingly, was to figure out how the monopoly of epistemic power that benefits the few could be redistributed to the many: to the underclass of partially educated students he encountered in Voc. Ed. classes in high school, the Vietnam vets he tutored, and the underprepared kids he taught in the Equal Opportunity Program at UCLA.

Mike grew up in the ethnic class culture of southern European migrants who settled in the industrial centers of the east and midwest, families where no one went to college and many didn’t finish high school, taking factory jobs instead. In *Lives on the Boundary*, Mike has a keen awareness of his worried parents, poised between the instability of working-class jobs and the perils of small-proprietor business operations, like the Spaghetti House restaurant his father ran for a few years in Altoona, Pennsylvania, until he had to close it when the Pennsylvania Railroad shut down and the local

economy in Altoona collapsed. The family moved to Los Angeles, and Mike's mother supported them working as a waitress.

Mike lived the rest of his life in Los Angeles. In the late 1950s, when he was in high school, this meant the allure of beatniks, non-conformist high school English teachers, and the various bohemian subcultures of Southern California that withheld consent in the Eisenhower era to the mainstream view of American life on *Father Knows Best* and *Ozzie & Harriet*—harbingers of the counterculture and New Left about to emerge in the 1960s. Like the disaffected youth of his time, he wrote poetry, watched films at L.A.'s small art-house cinemas, and listened to Black music. He came of age, that is, in an anti-union city of celluloid dreams, on the verge of startling political and cultural change.

Mike registers these changes in *Lives on the Boundary*, when he takes readers on a walk through Campbell Hall at UCLA sometime in the mid-1970s, when “the walls were covered with posters, flyers, and articles clipped from the newspaper . . . calls for legal defense funds and vigils for justice. There was news about military atrocities in Chile, CIA murders in Africa, the uprooting of the American Indian” (169). The anti-Vietnam War movement, Black power, and Third World politics had upended the old order on college campuses, politicizing a generation and raising new questions about access to college and the educability of poor and working-class students—Black and white, Latinx, Asian American, and Indigenous—formerly excluded by selective admissions. Open admissions was just starting at the CUNY colleges, the result of demonstrations and lobbying by a loose coalition of the Black and Puerto Rican Student Community at City College, the New York City Central Labor Council, and assorted radicals and reformers.

Mike comes into view in U.S. college composition at a moment intent on democratizing higher education, in the era of open admissions, the founding of Equal Opportunity Programs, and the refashioning of old-school remedial “bonehead” English courses into basic writing. Like his counterparts on the East Coast at CUNY—who included not only notable compositionists such as Mina Shaughnessy and John Brereton but also the postcolonial critic Aijaz Ahmad (who briefly directed the SEEK program at City College) and writers and poets like June Jordan, Toni Cade Bambara, and Adrienne Rich—Mike was seeking a richer use of language, a more open form of education, and an understanding of how the complex logics of error might unlock students' ways of knowing.

For Mike, the keyword was intelligence, and the educational imperative was to redefine it—to delink it from the measurement of standardized testing with its predictable white, middle-class norms and to see it instead as a form of intellectual work that students from underserved educational backgrounds apply to reading and writing. As Mike shows over and over in *Lives on the Boundary* and in articles like “‘This Wooden Shack Place’: The Logic of an Unconventional Reading,” with Glynda Hull, what may appear on the surface to be poor student performances, pathologized by the dominant medical vocabulary of remediation, can, in the realm of pedagogical practice, be unpacked and elaborated as the grounds of learning rather than corrected as an absence of knowledge.

This, at any rate, is how composition and writing studies have conventionally pictured Mike’s legacy—how he, along with Mina Shaughnessy, David Bartholomae, Patricia Bizzell, and assorted others, changed the way we read student writing, setting out the theoretical/pedagogical groundwork not just for basic writing but, more widely, for the emergent field of a modern composition and its resistance to what Mike called the “cognitive reductionism” and “language of exclusion” in the American university (see “Narrowing the Mind and Page” and “The Language of Exclusion at the University”). Often left out of this standard portrait, however, is Mike’s later work, after he moved from the undergraduate writing program to the School of Education at UCLA.

The Mind at Work: Valuing the Intelligence of the American Worker, for example, considerably complicates our understanding of Mike’s lifework, operating on non-academic terrain, investigating everyday working-class jobs and the practical intelligence of waitresses, carpenters, electricians, and hair stylists. *The Mind at Work*, as Mike makes clear, is meant to repay his debt to earlier immigrant generations of working-class men and women by recognizing—and honoring—the kinds of intelligence enacted through manual labor. But it is also meant to call into question the imputed hierarchy of blue-collar and white-collar work itself, to challenge the ideological underpinnings of the class distinctions between mental and manual labor, academic knowledge and vocational education.

The official mission (if not always the reality) of American higher education, of course, has been to lift working-class kids into middle-class jobs, and it may not be self-evident at first glance what writing studies and mainstream college composition programs might make of Mike’s later work on the dignity and complexity of labor, in particular his interest in integrating vocational and academic education. Part of the difficulty comes from

the longstanding conceptual impasse in composition between “pragmatic” approaches, on one hand, that teach for real-world careers and/or academic success and “critical” pedagogies, on the other, that aspire to make students more active and aware as citizens and political agents.¹ As Min-Zhan Lu and Bruce Horner have suggested, however, it is altogether thinkable to dissolve the pragmatic/critical binary and imagine a writing course that investigates the meanings of such keywords as “careers,” “mobility,” and “skills” in the unsettled division of labor that has emerged with the shift from the older Fordist economy, with its lifetime careers of “company men” and relatively stable union jobs, to the mobility of deterritorialized portfolio men and women and the precariousness of flexible labor in the era of “fast capitalism.”

I am drawn to such a vision of “critical vocationalism” and the possibilities it raises, in single writing classrooms, certainly, but also, especially, in non-corporate professional writing majors, where students can explore over time the distribution, uses, constraints, and untapped potentialities of the available means of communication—where the acquisition of vocational skills and academic critique are in constant interaction. To be sure, I realize that in the final analysis such initiatives, for all their merits and attractions, are inescapably part of the same old class reproduction and its hierarchies of mental and manual labor. But this is precisely why I think Mike’s *The Mind at Work* is important—because it offers not so much a programmatic blueprint as an orientation toward how we think about intelligence, the class divisions between blue-collar and white-collar labor, and the intertwined realities of work and school.

Rattling through the back of my mind are Karl Marx’s words about how the prevailing division of labor restricts humans to an “exclusive sphere of activity, which is forced on them and from which they cannot escape.” What Marx imagined instead was the negation of the prevailing division of labor, to replace its mind/body, mental/manual dichotomies with self-determining multi-dimensional individuals who “hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, raise cattle in the evening, criticize, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming a hunter, fisherman, herdsman, or critic” (53).

Just as I have a mind: these words linger, marking the radical affirmation in Mike’s work of the intelligence of ordinary people against the narrowing effects of schooling and the stifling divisions of mental and manual labor. This is what enabled Mike to imagine, at least in broad outline, an educational future that circumvents the classic liberal formula of equalizing opportunity (and thereby legitimizing the inevitably unequal results).

Mike's investigations of intelligence at school and work led him rather to sense what you might call the "not-yet" that is lurking unrealized in the contradictory realities of class society, the latent possibilities of meaning-making and social-being that might help us anticipate how to expand the actual scope and capacities of the human personality, to make individuals fit for more generous and wide-ranging participation in a truly social democracy.

NOTE

1. The "pragmatic/critical" split can be dated, at least symbolically, to the 1999 appearance of Russel Durst's *Collision Course: Conflict, Negotiation, and Learning in College Composition* and the subsequent exchange between William Thelin ("Understanding Problems of Critical Pedagogy" and "Response to Russel Durst") and Durst ("Can We Be Critical of Critical Pedagogy?").

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