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Sara Goldrick-Rab^a

^a University of Wisconsin-Madison

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Comments on Mike Rose’s Essay “Rethinking Remedial Education and the Academic-Vocational Divide”

Sara Goldrick-Rab

University of Wisconsin-Madison

The extent of our national failure to provide sizeable numbers of adults from low-income families with a meaningful postsecondary education that helps them fulfill personal and career goals is staggering. A recent study concluded that despite decades of public policy “intervention,” in the United States students from working-class backgrounds are essentially “running in place”—consistently left behind as higher education strives to be ever more elite, and in doing so continues to emphasize the needs of the middle and upper class (Bastedo & Ozan, 2011).

The struggle over whether all students have a right to a high-quality, affordable college education, or whether it is a privilege they must “earn” through high test scores and parental savings for tuition, plays out daily in our so-called “remedial” or “developmental” classes. These are the rooms where we warehouse the students whom most colleges and universities do not know what to do with—students who struggle to read and write despite having been granted a high school diploma or GED. Every year millions of students enter these classes, placed by arbitrary cut-scores on standardized tests they did not anticipate having to take, and few ever move on to credit-bearing college coursework (what the rest of us would consider the “real deal”). As Thomas Bailey (2009) of the Community College Research Center has shown, the more levels of developmental courses a student must go through, the less likely that student is to ever complete college English or math.

What explains our failure to solve this obvious leak in the college pipeline? A few years ago, in a blueprint for reforming community colleges issued by the Brookings Institution, my colleagues and I argued that it was partly because institutions lacked sufficient rigorous evidence telling them how (Goldrick-Rab, Harris, Mazzeo, & Kienzl, 2009). Therefore, we argued for four major policy innovations at the federal level: a new system of goals and monitoring, a doubling of federal support for community colleges, incentives to improve instruction at community colleges in ways that accorded with rigorous research, and a new federal data system on student progress in community colleges. The call for implementation of rigorously tested practices accords with current

ethos in education reform that says that we first must test and experimentally evaluate interventions, determine “what works,” and then implement those practices. Because relatively little time and money has been spent on higher education research, especially compared to the industry’s rapid growth, common sense would suggest that therein lay a major problem. We thought we simply did not have the answers required.

Following publication of that paper, I met Mike Rose. Our introduction was virtual, beginning with an e-mail from Rose, but I will never forget it. After first commending me for attending to the critical problems facing community college students, Rose gently said, “But Sara, I don’t agree—the problem is not that we don’t know how to remediate students. It’s that we don’t want to invest in doing it right.”

I admit, I was skeptical. After all, the practices he went on to describe—the intense attention to instructing students in ways that felt meaningful to them—had never been randomly assigned. How did he “know” they worked? Years later, I am ashamed for having doubted the lessons from decades of experience and real-life practice. For as Rose so clearly describes in this article, practitioners have deep and valid knowledge of what we must do. Executing the work as they describe it is another matter entirely.

That is mainly because the first step to reform is ridding ourselves of the assumptions, pre-suppositions, and paternalistic tendencies undergirding our collective approach to educating adults. Many remedial approaches assume a one-way street—teacher teaches student—that alienates learners with real experience from the start. Rose’s research and writing over many decades shows us that students teach teachers as well—and in doing so, teach themselves. It is our beliefs about human capacity that “create both instructional responses and institutional structures that limit human development for people already behind the economic eight ball.” We rarely see educational interventions (even comprehensive ones like learning communities and contextualized learning) really tackle the instincts and values of the educators. We are missing the point. And it’s not surprising, since as Rose points out, “Most people who make policy that affects students like these—and a fair number whose research involves them—haven’t spent time in such classrooms. And, with few exceptions, those who do aren’t there for long.”

For researchers, this is honest, painful truth. We have to confess that what we think “works” says as much about our own attitudes towards students as it does about our statistical standards. We treat “problem” students as “at risk,” suffering “deficiencies” that locate all causality of failure within students’ families and backgrounds rather than recognizing the culpability of states and colleges that refuse to learn how to effectively educate all-comers.

Moreover, our approaches are grounded in an overarching adherence to a theory of “drill and kill” that itself has limited empirical support. We would not want to make college “too hard” for students for whom we have low expectations; so we give them lowest common denominator work. As Rose says, “The claim that students’ academic identity and motivation will benefit from unchallenging assignments . . . [is] both unsubstantiated and patronizing.” And the best pedagogical practices will fail if they are not implemented in a more supportive structural context, one that provides credit for the hard work students do to learn (and relearn) how to read and write, one that rewards the teachers who teach these subjects by employing them full-time and providing benefits, and one that gives colleges the resources they need to educate, advise, and support students.

As hard as it is to admit that the problems we face are even bigger than they appear, policy makers and researchers need to attend to Rose’s conception of the struggle. “These interlayered

dimensions of educational remediation – the curricular and ideological, the structural, and the symbolic – are a formidable barrier to change. Reformers might alter something structural, but the assumptions beneath the curriculum remain unchanged. Or instructors might create new curricula, but can't simultaneously work on the structural level. Comprehensive change begins to feel remote."

We must rethink the purpose and function of remedial education, and recognize it for the stratifying purpose it now serves. Mike Rose may not lay out the full roadmap in this single article, but in this and other work he certainly provides the urgency to move forward. I expect his conclusion will stay with me as I travel through policy discussions for many years to come: "The democratic philosophy I envision would affirm the ability of the common person. It would guide us to see in basic skills instruction the rich possibility for developing literacy and numeracy and for realizing the promise of a second-chance society. It would honor multiple kinds of knowledge and advance the humanistic, aesthetic, and ethical dimensions of an occupational education." In other words, Rose's vision it would give us a real shot of helping Americans—all Americans—become truly 21st-century citizens of the world. Imagine that.

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