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Rethinking Remedial Education and the Academic–Vocational Divide: Complementary Perspectives

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This is indeed, as Mike Rose points out, a crucial moment in the history of education in the United States. On one hand, we see a rhetoric of College for All, and pressure to get more racial minorities and low-income students into higher education, while the high school dropout rate stays stubbornly high near 30%. There's another rhetoric, about the importance of education for national growth and competitiveness, while states are cutting back funding for education at every turn. Civic life has degenerated into a stalemate between two political parties while the civic role of schooling—its historical role—has dwindled under the pressure of vocationalism, of viewing schooling primarily as a vehicle for individual hopes of getting ahead.

There's a potential outcome of all this that is quite dismal. Public support for schooling, including higher education, continues to erode, stifling the dream of College for All (or even most). We increasingly view education as a private good, with charter school and choice mechanisms as well as funding constraints contributing to this. We continue the ineffective efforts to force schools to improve the education of all children, including the use of narrowly behaviorist teaching methods and tests, but without investing in the capacities of teachers and leaders and schools to teach in broader and more effective ways. We increasingly will view schools as sorting mechanisms—as indeed they have always been—and give up on the prospects that they will be broadly educational institutions for all children. And under such pressures second-chance mechanisms—which include the remedial efforts that Rose describes—will likely wither away, irrelevant to the main emphases of education. This is a narrow and inequitable vision, although we've been heading in that direction for a decade, with the falsely named No Child Left Behind legislation leading the way.

But the power of Mike Rose's work, and of his AERA presidential address, is that he gives us some alternative ways of thinking about schooling—ways of seeing more powerful forms of schooling that rise above the narrow educational divisions we have created, that move beyond self-interest. In particular, his presidential address provides a vision of two changes—eroding the

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boundary between academic and vocational education, and moving past the dreadful teaching that dominates remedial education (or developmental education, or basic skills, or foundational education, or whatever euphemism one might choose).

Indeed, on both these fronts there's more good news out there than most people realize. To confront the academic–vocational divide, at the high school level there has been a movement to develop multiple “pathways,” which look somewhat like majors in colleges—course sequences arranged around a broadly occupational theme like business, or health professions, or manufacturing technologies. Then students take both conventional academic and some broadly vocational courses, but ideally integrated so that the boundaries between the academic and the vocational start to blur. Another current name for pathways is “linked learning,” because well-integrated forms of these pathways link the learning in both academic and vocational subjects—and in addition link the learning between school settings and out-of-school internship placements, making good on the often-broken promise to integrate school-based and work-based learning (as some European apprenticeship systems do). Many districts are now converting their large, dysfunctional high schools into multiple pathways as ways of overcoming their numerous drawbacks (not the least of which are high dropout rates). Whether the approach of multiple pathways can in the end displace or coexist with the conventional high school remains to be seen, but it is a strong competitor that avoids the academic–vocational divide.

At the community college level, learning communities have become well-known—if not necessarily widely practiced—ways of combining materials from several disciplines. Typically students take two or three courses together, again with integration among the courses so they are not viewed as so separate as they usually are. Learning communities can be used for a variety of interdisciplinary teaching, including efforts to combine the necessary academic material into occupational programs—including the often nonstandard forms of math and reading and writing that dominate various occupations. A variant is to develop linked courses, where an academic subject—including possibly a remedial subject—is linked to the occupational program that it serves. Mike's example in his presidential address is an applied math course taught to welders. My own favorite example is a math course taught in an HVAC (heating, ventilating, and air conditioning program). It turns out the underlying principles follow the logic of differential equations, translated into multiple nonlinear equations—but where the instructor emphasized the importance of checking the math against their experience in HVAC because “the equations can lie”—can mislead the unwary. Learning communities and linked courses are widely known in community colleges; they are widely popular and increasingly evaluated with positive results. But they seem to be quite rare: Even colleges that have them usually include only one or two—so the question, as for linked learning, is whether these integrated forms of instruction can overcome our tendency to divide the academic and the vocational.

Remediation is a subject about which we have to be ambivalent. On one hand, we have developed a schooling system dominated by what I call dynamic inequality: Students start schooling in, say, kindergarten with differences in both cognitive and noncognitive capacities that have been conditioned by class and race, by parental and community influences of all kinds. Then, rather than narrowing these differences, our schooling system magnifies them over time as some elite students do better and better, whereas others fall further and further behind their peers and grade-level norms. One result is that the need for remediation grows greater and greater the longer students stay in school. It has become impossible to ignore in community colleges and indeed in many four-year colleges as well; it emerges in the transition to high school too, and in

the transition to middle school—although almost no one notices the similarities of the problem because of the silos we have built around college, around high school, around middle school.

But fortunately the American system has created a vast array of second-chance opportunities—and, as dismal as the escalating need for remediation is, the provision of second chances reflects a commitment of a sort to undoing these differences. The problem is that second-chance efforts work under difficult conditions—marginal funding, part-time instructors, a stance toward remedial instruction that Mike Rose describes as breaking complex competencies into subskills and drilling on them endlessly and that I call remedial pedagogy—decontextualized drill and practice on subskills that students could have mastered much earlier in their schooling, focused on getting rather than understanding the right answers.

But the good news is that, as in efforts to bridge the academic–vocational divide, we can see many efforts to overcome remedial pedagogy. In the work we have undertaken in 14 community colleges, we have seen departments that have consciously organized themselves to move away from remedial pedagogy, toward approaches that are more student centered, conceptual, and constructivist. We have seen other institutions in which faculty have self-consciously adopted innovations borrowed from K-12 education—Reading Apprenticeship and the writing process championed by the National Writing Project are two good examples. Of course, learning communities and linked courses provide antidotes for the tendency of remedial pedagogy to be totally decontextualized, divorced from any applications either in formal schooling or in the occupational world. And we have seen colleges that have self-consciously moved away from the language of remediation and deficit, trying to erode the division between “basic” skills and “advanced” skills by stressing the commonalities of learning across all students—an effort to eliminate the stigma, or the negative stereotype threat (as Claude Steele might put it), of courses relentlessly labeled remedial.

So there are hopeful signs, as Mike Rose stresses. To see them, though, it’s first necessary to go into schools and colleges, as he does, to see what students are up to; to talk with the instructors who have in some way or another come up with alternative approaches—sometimes on their own, sometimes in the company of others; to talk with the administrators who by turns support and impede the development of these innovations.

And then the pressing need is to expand the scale of these innovations. Despite their appeal, multiple pathways, linked learning, learning communities, and alternatives to remedial pedagogy all exist in smaller numbers than anyone would like. And here we confront the barriers to the adoption of new policies and innovations: In conventional language what we need is for these innovations “to go to scale,” to become adopted in a much wider variety of settings.

But here we have developed an approach to policy making that is quite unhelpful and that needs to be recognized and replaced. Many policy makers and researchers seem to think that, once we find a promising practice, all we need to do is develop pilot projects, evaluate them, and then take the successful models “to scale” or “scale them up”—something we can supposedly do rather fast, as in the notions we also have about “turnaround schools” with “turnaround specialists” capable of reshaping failing schools overnight.

But that’s not what enduring innovation looks like. In high school reforms, we have been impressed with the tendency for real changes to emerge “from the inside out,” developed and championed by faculty working in concert with one another. In the community colleges we have seen, again enduring change comes when faculty, along with mid-level administrators, come to recognize problems with conventional ways of doing thing, and develop their own

approaches—drawing on ideas from outside, of course, but always modifying them to local circumstances. And this trial and error and modification takes time—10 to 15 years of steady development, in some cases—rather than the instantaneous implementation implied by expanding pilot projects and going “to scale.”

More generally, the literature on innovations stresses that the movement from knowledge about a potential innovation to adoption takes many steps, and knowledge or research or evidence is only the first of six or seven stages. In addition to a knowledge base, the process typically requires the diffusion of information about the innovation; the persuasion of others that the innovation is worth doing; the decision to adopt an innovation, which can depend on a host of institutional and fiscal factors; the initial implementation, with attendant trial and error; and finally the institutionalization of the innovation so it doesn’t blow away with the next wind of reform. None of this happens without careful shepherding, by teachers and administrators alike, and in many cases with the participation of policy makers who provide the necessary financial and human resources. At this point those of us who would like to see innovation—specifically in the areas of the academic–vocational divide and of remediation, as well as the factors that cause these problems—have to get down in the weeds of policy making and persuasion, addressing ourselves to administrators and policy makers as much as to teachers and researchers who can uncover the innovations we strive for.

In the end, then, the process of innovation starts with the practices of individual instructors, and Mike Rose has done as much as anyone to uncover the hidden assumptions underlying our educational system *and* to highlight the individuals who have developed alternative visions. But without an institutional and policy approach, these changes remain isolated and idiosyncratic, and reach many fewer students than anyone should like. As John Dewey—an individual who argued against the academic divide as powerfully as anyone—might say, we need a both–and approach to these issues.