

A Different Curriculum of Preparation for Work: Commentary on Mike Rose, Sara Goldrick-Rab, Kris Gutiérrez and Norton Grubb

Helena Harlow Worthen

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UCB Center for Labor Research and Education

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The January 2012 issue of *Mind, Culture, and Activity* published the Invited Presidential Address “Rethinking Remedial Education and the Academic-Vocational Divide,” given by Mike Rose at the 2011 meeting of the American Educational Research Association in New Orleans, along with responses and commentary by Sara Goldrick-Rab, Kris Gutiérrez, and Norton Grubb.

All four articles dealt with how the ineffective practices in remediation subvert the efforts of schools to prepare people for work. Students get tested and placed; those who show promise to climb the academic ladder get counseled into academic programs. The alternative to academic programs is vocational programs. Some people enroll in vocational programs because they are counseled into them; others choose them because they want a job, not a BA degree. But people who score poorly on the placement tests get both counseled into vocational programs and placed into remedial classes. These may be stand-alone or linked to vocational classes, but the curriculum is overwhelmingly the basic skills approach in which students are expected to build up language, reading and writing, and in some cases thought, from parts of speech and chopped-up bits of text (see Grubb, 1999, chap. 5). Thus, the very programs that should be preparing people for work channel them into discouraging, time-consuming, mind-numbing remediation programs.

Rose and his responders are all explicitly unhappy with remediation. Rose tells how he avoided teaching the skills-based remediation curriculum and prepared returning veterans for college entry by having them read John Donne, Big Bang theory and Aboriginal creation myths. Sara Goldrick-Rab urges policymakers and researchers to fully rethink the purpose and function of remediation. Kris Gutierrez advocates for a sociocultural approach that pays attention to whole activity settings and uses diversity itself as a resource for learning. Norton Grubb describes a “complimentary perspective,” learning communities in community colleges where occupational/technical programs link up with academic programs. These are all ways to avoid or replace traditional forms of remediation.

However, all four of them struggled with, and none questioned, the idea that preparation for work means training in job skills, narrowly defined. My argument is that they have the unit of analysis wrong. The real curriculum of preparation for work should not be job skills. What people are really doing in vocational classes is not just learning how to hold a hammer or a pair of scissors. They are learning how to earn a living—or, given the right curriculum, they should be. When we think of job training as teaching people how to earn a living, it's easy to see that earning a living is a practice. It is not just job skills, nor is it remediation. It has a participant structure, a past and a future, ways to engage, opportunities to learn and develop. Its content includes history, economics, law, public policy, communication, health and safety, organizing, and everything else that prepares someone to enter the labor force, or stay in it, do a job, control the pace and conditions of work enough to survive the job, and still have body and soul intact. 35 40

This is the actual curriculum of labor education, which is only rarely officially linked to job-training programs. Speaking as a labor educator, having taught all of these to classes of working people through the labor education extension program at the University of Illinois, I can testify that learning in these classes looks more like connecting the dots than skill-and-drill. If you show someone the article in her contract that allows her a day of paid bereavement leave to attend her husband's funeral, she can read it, no matter how she might have scored on a reading test. If this is the first time she has had a copy of her contract in her hands, she will be reading the whole thing within a few days. 45

In order to write this response, I went back and reread Mike Rose's (2004) wonderful book *The Mind at Work: Valuing the Intelligence of the American Worker*. His writing is an eloquent salute to the challenge and intellectual complexity of physical and manual work. However, he focused on job skills, stepping back to recall the big picture of earning a living only toward the end of the book: "The house or the automobile or the computer could be the core of a rich, integrated curriculum, one that includes social and technical history, science and economics, and hands-on assembly and repair" (p. 192). There is indeed a whole historical, cultural, legal, economic, and organizational world behind the skills of carpentry that empowers someone who wields a hammer to earn a living and lead a decent life, if he or she has access to that curriculum. But it is not taught in vocational programs (example of an exception: the San Francisco City College Department of Labor and Community Studies, which links labor studies with vocational programs). It certainly does not show up in remedial programs. And when it is taught for the purpose of empowering someone to earn a living (not just do a job), it is taught from the point of view of the worker, not the employer. 50 55 60

Escaping the powerful skills discourse is hard. "Skills" is a unit of analysis that works all the way up and down the ladder, for policymakers, employers, and compensation specialists as well as for teachers of individual workers. It assumes that the whole is the sum of the parts. At the lowest level, basic skills has students trying to learn to communicate starting with parts of speech. At the highest level of abstraction of our job-training policy, the Department of Labor, job skills are the basis for our Standard Occupational Classification system. This is framed in straight-up free market economics terms: The 1999 U.S. Department of Labor *Report on the American Workforce* says that "assumptions of competitive capital and labor markets are fundamental to labor composition measures. These assumptions permit hourly earnings to be used to measure each type of worker's contribution to output and therefore, as a measure of skill" (p. 44). This means that the wages earned by workers who do a job are used to measure how skilled a job is. No other factors such as gender, ethnicity, age, or union representation (all social, historical, 65 70 75

cultural factors) are assumed. According to this logic, high skills equal high wages. No wonder preparation for work equals learning skills.

A curriculum for earning a living would acknowledge that high skills may get you a job, but they won't guarantee a high wage or even a safe and decent job. This curriculum would then bring forward the social, historical, and cultural factors that are also in play, including how to make them work in your favor. 80

Further down the page, the report adds, "Unionized workers earn more, on average, than nonunionized workers. Nonetheless, competitive firms will attempt to equate the prevailing wage, however it is determined, to the value of the worker's marginal product" (p. 44). The real wages of the last 30 years in the United States show that "however it is determined" has meant pulling unionized workers' wages down. 85

The concept of "practice" is a good way to escape the pull of the powerful skills discourse (see Lave & Wenger, 1991). Comparing skills and practices, skills—for example, the ability to use a saw without breaking it—are as follows:

The property of an individual;	90	
Acquired through instruction, developmentally, and once acquired, stable;		
One of many innately determined cognitive skills;		
Ahistorical and outside culture, in the sense that all individuals of a certain skill level have equivalent skills regardless of place or point in time;		
Measurable as a unitary phenomenon, like IQ, and	95	
Transformative; that is, capable changing mental processes or cognitive capacity		Q2

On the other hand, a practice—for example, earning a living by doing some kind of work—is as follows:

The property of a social structure (participant structure) rather than an isolated individual;		
Acquired through participation in the social practices that require it;	100	
Materially based but socially generated rather than innate;		
Initially emergent; later, developing or waning according to social demands;		
Dynamic, studied rather than measured;		
Historical and ideologically nonneutral;		
Like oral speech, enabling self-reflection	105	Q3

Shifting the unit of analysis of preparation for work from "job skills" to "earning a living" widens the focus from something individual to something social and collective and replaces the remediation curriculum with broad historical and cultural content.

In the midnineties, in the middle of doing my dissertation research, I was teaching a remedial class called Basic Reading at College of Alameda, part of the Peralta Community Colleges in Oakland, California. I had 40 students in this class, including English as a Second Language students, dislocated homemakers, people with head injuries, people on release from the jail, and students from the auto repair program. The class met four mornings a week for 50 minutes. I was supposed to teach and test, teach and test. It was a travesty. To avoid the basic skills lockstep, like Mike Rose I tried poetry, newspapers, and plays, as if I was preparing the students for a freshman English class. Then one morning I looked at them and said to myself, "These people don't need 110 115

this class or even freshman English—they need jobs.” Decent jobs—not working all night in a mom and pop restaurant, like some of the Asian girls who fell asleep the moment they sat down.

The key word was “decent.” But decent jobs are not given away. There is actually a definition of a “decent job” produced by the Working for America Institute (2009) as a checklist for labor representatives who are delegates to regional Workforce Investment Act boards, which decide how and to whom job training funding should be awarded (<http://www.workingforamerica.org>). This list of characteristics of a decent job includes paying a living wage (not minimum wage), health and retirement benefits, access to further training, a career ladder (not a dead-end job), and the opportunity to choose union representation. Jobs like this are the outcome of long, difficult negotiations between collectivities of workers and employers. An example of a job in the United States that has gone from being a bad job to being a good job through such negotiations is nursing. These negotiations are about how to make an unsafe job safe and a humiliating job fair, how to build relationships with coworkers, and how to have a strategic grasp of the economics of the industry. These intellectual challenges arise whether we are talking about welders, nurses, schoolteachers, postal workers, bus drivers, laborers, farmers, steelworkers, building trades people, clerical workers—it doesn’t matter.

One of my dissertation advisers was Norton Grubb. I was part of his team that observed more than 200 community college classes to find out “what was going on” inside the classroom. Our work appears in his 1999 book *Honored but Invisible: An Inside Look at Teaching in Community Colleges*. For my unit of analysis, I chose literacy practices rather than skills. The book is about teaching, but not about the “skills” of teachers; it’s about the practices in the classroom.

At this point, I should mention that our observations in the community colleges provided a clear view of the “academic-vocational divide” of Mike Rose’s title up close. It is not imaginary. Instructors who taught academic classes were almost completely oblivious of what went on in the programs of their vocational colleagues. Specifically, they had almost no appreciation of the kinds of literacy artifacts that were typical of occupational/technical learning: manuals, websites, blueprints, recipes, diagrams, formulas, maps, measuring devices, and so on. Vocational instructors, on the other hand, were very aware of what went on over on the academic side, especially in remediation programs, and very critical: “My students don’t need no damn English class” was typical. Nor did either side appreciate the types of literacy practices (as compared to artifacts) of the other side, despite the fact that the best classes on both sides engaged in strikingly similar literacy practices that maximized opportunities for all students to learn. The divide, in other words, is not just two knowledge domain silos each endowed with its own social privilege or stigma. It exists on the ground, in hallways, parking lots, and faculty meetings where instructors hardly spoke to each other. The chill was passed on to the students, too.

But coming to this project as someone with deep experience in the teachers union (a union that considers itself part of the broader labor movement), I could not help noticing that the majority of vocational classes were taught from the employer’s point of view, not from the worker’s point of view. This constrained the curriculum. Exceptions were some joint college-union programs in the building trades and one union-sponsored food service delivery program. But in most programs, the students learned nothing about labor and employment law, workers’ compensation, occupational safety and health or—especially—how to read, enforce, or negotiate a contract, nothing about labor history or the history of labor struggles in their field, nothing about what union might or might not represent them. Graduates of these programs might not know how to read a paycheck to see if they are being paid as employees or independent contractors or how to apply for

worker's compensation if they are hurt or unemployment benefits if they are laid off. They would be delivered to their first job interview as naive about the social relations of their work as if they had just graduated from high school. The practice of these classrooms, then, was modeled on the employer–employee relationship, with the teacher as employer, not worker advocate. 165

Labor education, by way of contrast, not only challenges the assumptions of the academic/vocational divide by pushing difficult academic content into the curriculum but also challenges the vocational classroom practice of modeling the workplace from the perspective of the employer.

I finished up my dissertation and went looking for jobs in labor education so that I could teach about earning a living, and luckily, building on my experience as an elected officer, organizer, and site representative for various levels of the California Federation of Teachers (AFT, AFL-CIO), I got hired, first in Philadelphia and then in Chicago and Champaign, Illinois. Then I tried to bring what I had learned about education to labor education, and vice versa. This is what I am doing now. 170 175

When I am asked what a working person needs to learn other than job skills, I remember some workers at a power plant in Illinois. It was an old, coal-fired plant that, because of some state legislation, had to use low-grade local coal that required treatment before it could be burned. The treatment used many strong chemicals. Like much of U.S. infrastructure, this plant had gone without upgrading or adequate maintenance for many years. One day workers came in to find a leak that had formed a wide pool. They were given a direct order to clean it up. They had safety glasses, gloves, and mops but no respirators or hazmat suits. The source of the leak was hard to find and hard to fix, so the cleanup was still going on after a week, when their supervisor told them that they needed hazmat suits, and then a week later, when the supervisor brought in respirators. Workers soon began to wonder what risks they had been exposed to during the first and second weeks of the cleanup. Incidentally, in 2008 in the United States, more than 5,000 people died on the job. Our fatality rate is 6 times greater than that of Great Britain. I made a short list of what a worker who has received such a direct order might want to know in order to choose what to do: 180 185

How far should he trust his supervisor? 190

What is the substance on the floor?

What can it do to him?

What tools does he really need?

What are his legal and contractual rights (if any)?

What will happen to him if he refuses to mop it up? 195

Who else will stand with him? How should he communicate with those other workers?

What would life will be like for him if he loses his job?

The answers to some of these questions could be called “skills,” but the rest are about the social practices of his specific situation at work. These are the ones that could save his life or kill him. Some—like, How far should he trust his supervisor?—are particular to his job. But others—What are his legal rights?—are governed by federal law. The curriculum that could provide him the answers to these questions is not something he can learn on demand, at the moment he needs it. It should have been part of his preparation for work. But given the skills-focused, employer-driven nature of most job training, it almost certainly wasn't. 200

Mike Rose, Sara Goldrick-Rab, Kris Gutteriez, and Norton Grubb deplore the conventional practices of remediation and are looking for ways that school can play a role in preparation for work that does not dishonor the educational needs of people who have to earn a living as wage workers. The knowledge domain of labor education, along with its social practices, is an example of another possibility. 205

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