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Review: *The Mind at Work: Valuing the Intelligence of the American Worker* by Mike Rose

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The Mind at Work: Valuing the Intelligence of the American Worker by Mike Rose. New York: Viking, 2004. 288 pp. ISBN 0-670-03282-4

Reading Whatever Blows Your Hair Back

In broad terms, Rose's latest work "offers an analysis of physical work and intelligence and a reflection on how we might think more clearly and fairly about them" in a so-called democratic society (p.19). Using personal experience, family memory, interview and observational data, Rose transports us to places not usually perceived as cognitively demanding contexts: a restaurant, a beauty salon, a shop floor, a work rehabilitation program for youth. Through a rigorous and respectful look at the professions of waitress, hair stylist, plumber, carpenter and welder, we are introduced to people that skillfully negotiate their challenge-laden work environments.

Now, it is in and through these "working portraits" that the intellectual and emotional force of Rose's analysis is conveyed. In these sketches we are given a corner booth from which we can observe how a waitress, Rose's own mother, summons and hones a whole range of cognitive abilities to manage the intermittent craziness of coffee shops such as Norm's and Coffee Dan's. We see her exercise and develop a trusty memory, lightning quick decision making abilities, all while trying to efficiently coordinate eye, mind, hand, brain, and torso. Similarly, Rose carries us into a barber's chair to experience the imagination and artistry of a hairstylist transforming clients' words into desired appearances. And, we are handed welder's goggles that allow us to witness the judgment, evaluation, and craft involved in fusing slabs of metal.

John Dewey, in his erudite little book *Experience and Education* (1938), wrote that humankind was prone to "think in terms of extreme opposites. It is given to formulating its beliefs in terms of *either-ors*" (p.17). Rose's *Mind at Work*, crafted in an eloquent prose that complements its conceptual complexity, seeks to problematize the handful of dichotomies we all carry in our back pockets and rely on to explain the world. The hand-brain dichotomy that has historically colonized the study of human cognition, the "abstract thought-concrete thought" binary that has handcuffed the re-organization of public schooling in the United States, and the "new knowledge work vs. old industrial work" opposition that currently plays a prominent role in shaping educational and public policy. Rose's text culminates with an informative, problem-provoking discussion on the history of the split between academic study and vocational education and what he calls the "fundamental paradox of vocational education . . . it's diminishment of the

intellectual dimension of common work and the people who do it" (p. 170). Educational researchers, policy makers, teachers and those concerned with the direction of vocational education in American public schools will find their thinking refreshed by this historically informed analysis.

Keeping in line with the liberal American spirit, most book reviewers usually recommend that people read the book they have just passed sentence on. In that respect this review is no different. But I want to go a bit further.

There is a scene from the movie, *Good Will Hunting* (1997), in which the main character, played by Matt Damon, is at his first therapy session with a psychiatrist played by Robin Williams. The hostile Damon stalks around Williams' office, closely eyeing the tomes on the shelves, the titles on the spines possible passwords into the doctor's psyche. After a brief reconnaissance, Damon mutters:

"The United States of America, a complete history, volume one . . . Jesus, you want to read a real history book, read Howard Zinn's *People's History of the United States*. That book'll fuckin' knock you on your ass . . . you fuckin' people baffle me. You spend all your money on these fuckin' fancy books, you surround yourself with them and they're the wrong fuckin' books."

Williams' retorts, "What are the 'right fuckin' books,' Will?"

"Hey, whatever blows your hair back . . ."

Rose's *The Mind at Work* is that kind of book. It is a work you would recommend, even lend, to friends and colleagues but not without photocopying their driver's license and swiping their credit cards.

However, no work is flawless. My personal preference for *The Mind at Work* would have been to see an extended critique of how societies and workplaces organized according to capitalist economic laws, ethics, and metaphysics are not intended for cognitively rewarding work experiences to occur. Also, writing as a Chicano, born and raised in a pathologically racist society, a fuller historical analysis of the sick relation between workplace opportunity, race, and cognition would have been fitting. It is of utmost importance to state that I think Rose does, in fact, forcefully and critically attend to these and other social concerns. My point is that we could endlessly draw from the well of the obvious and speak about what the book *is not*. No author in the history of writing has attended to everything to the satisfaction of every reader. Certainly, we as readers and thinkers have the responsibility to do at least *some* of the semiotic work of critical reading.

In keeping with the tenor of this review, let's do something different. Something that academics and graduate students who want to become academics

are not accustomed to doing. Sit and admire. Just for a while. OK, we can sharpen our pencils and double-check our highlighters as we repose. But first, let *The Mind at Work* do what it does so well—honor the dignity and intelligence of the American worker through artistic exposition and a precise, theoretically coherent analysis of their labor.

References

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