

The Mind at Work: Valuing the Intelligence of the American Worker

by Mike Rose

Published by Penguin Books, 2004, 249 pages

Reviewed by:

Jessica A. Hale (jhale15@wccnet.edu), Orientation Advisor, Washtenaw Community College

The Mind at Work: Valuing the Intelligence of the American Worker, written by Mike Rose, provides a fresh look at the work that comprises our daily lives. A faculty member of the UCLA Graduate School of Education, Rose wrote this book as a wake-up call for educators and policy makers, challenging some commonplace assumptions about the link between intelligence and the nature of work in America. As our nation turns its attention to training an effective workforce, Rose's book is a call to action for America's decision makers to rethink "education, job training, and the conditions in which people make a living" (p. xxxii). This review will provide background information on the author, an overview of the text, an analysis of its applicability to new student programming, and a conclusion with recommendations.

Rose was born into a working class family: "I come from a family of immigrants who, with two exceptions, did not finish high school, and who worked blue-collar or services jobs all their lives" (p. xi). As a result, he was profoundly aware of the assumptions made about members of the labor professions from a young age. In his current role as professor of social research methodology, Rose has found a way to combine "personal material with scholarship, matching it, each providing a check on the other" (p. 222). The work under review is an excellent example of Rose's ability to walk the delicate balance between passion and scholarship.

The Mind at Work is organized into eight chapters, an introduction, a conclusion, and an afterword on methodology. The introduction begins with an insight into the author's interest in this topic: his working class upbringing. As the first member of his family to attend college, Rose explores the broad implications of "occupational status and social class" in America today. He also provides a structural overview of the book, a brief description of each chapter, and reiterates his purpose "to provide an alternate lens on everyday work, to aid us in seeing the commonplace with greater precision" (p. xxxii).

Chapters 1–6 "focus on particular kinds of work and the particular people doing them" (p. xxviii). Rose provides insight into the mental activities related to waitressing, hair styling, plumbing, carpentry, electrical work, construction, and welding. Through extensive interviews and observations, Rose depicts the work of these professionals, including his family members, as a complex dance of cognitive activity. He highlights cognitive skill sets used in these "physical" professions, including interpersonal skills and memory (muscle and working), communication skills and aesthetic sense, problem solving and systematic thinking, language, mathematical concepts, procedural planning, and reflection and character development. A recurrent theme through these chapters is the role that formal technical and vocational education has played in the lives of these individuals.

Chapters 7 and 8 expand on the perceived distinction between activities that involve the

“hand and the brain” and Chapters 7 and 8 expand on the perceived distinction between activities that involve the “hand and the brain” and the role of vocation training in perpetuating this perception.

Specifically, Rose explores three higher status professions that blend body and mind work (surgery, physical therapy, and teaching) to demonstrate that the prevailing dichotomy between the manual and conceptual activities is a fallacy. Furthermore, Rose argued that our current educational system has perpetuated this cultural divide by establishing separate academic and vocational tracks, thereby preventing true democratic principles from prevailing in the curriculum. This sorting system limits the intellectual growth of many students and results in “huge material consequences—and social and civic consequences, as well” (p. 160). Rose calls for curricular revisions that would merge “democratic principles and educational practice” (p.194).

The conclusion of *The Mind At Work* inserts the preceding chapters into a broader context with an eye for economic and social implications. According to Rose, failure to recognize the intelligence of the working-class individual will result in perpetuating American economic and social divides and limit future potential. As the definition of intelligence continues to evolve, Americans need to reassess how this term is defined.

To affirm this conception of the mind and work is to be vigilant for the intelligence not only in the board room but on the shop floor; in the laboratory and alongside the house frame; in the classroom, the garage, the busy restaurant, vibrant with desire and strategic movement. This is a model of mind that befits the democratic imagination. (p. 216)

The final portion of Rose’s book discusses his methodology for this qualitative analysis of working class intelligence. Rose addresses his potential bias and the use of his own family in the book’s narrative. He also provides a brief summary of the cross disciplinary literary research he engaged to inform this study.

Overall, Rose’s work may prove to be a challenging read for students and is probably better suited for educators and policy makers. While the perspectives on intelligence, classism, and educational tracking are unique and poignant, they may be too abstract for the traditional-aged student reader. Furthermore, without a strong “character” to identify with and little personal professional or educational experience to draw from, students may be distanced from the harsh realities of occupational classism in America.

Cognitive distance from Rose’s work is also increased because it utilizes complex, field-specific jargon and a research underpinning. While students would benefit from exposure to the qualitative research tradition, the narratives provided in this text are not nearly gripping enough to inspire a new generation of researchers. As the organization of this book does not follow the traditional structure and organization of qualitative research studies, this may also confuse students.

While using this book in new student programming would be challenging, there are opportunities for collaboration across the curriculum. Due to the complex nature of the topics covered, this text could be incorporated into several courses, including psychology, American history, sociology, career exploration/development, and first-year experience. Perhaps an even more innovative solution would be to incorporate the text into all of the courses, thereby allowing students to approach the problem of occupational status from a multitude of perspectives. It should however, be noted that while a collaboration of this nature would no

doubt be beneficial for students and instructors (by reducing silos), the inertia to structure such a collaboration would be costly in terms of human resources and time.

To incorporate this book into new student programming at traditional four-year institutions, educators would need to develop extensive companion materials. Information related to classism, career exploration, and cognitive psychology would be essential supplemental readings. In addition, as most four-year institutions do not offer vocational tracks, supplementary materials on these working class occupations would need to be provided.

In some ways, this book might be a better fit for students in a community college or technical college setting. Students in these institutions are more likely to be in a vocational track or know other students in VocEd programs. Exposure and identification with students in similar academic programs might lend a greater degree of immediacy and resonance to the book's main themes. In addition, the effects of occupational status might be increasingly meaningful to these students as these institutions are typically home to a larger number of first-generation college students and students with working class parents.

That said, there are some potential issues to consider when utilizing *The Mind at Work* with first-year students. Rose's use of "we" and "our" in reference to his professional class may be off-putting to students who are excluded from this perspective. Furthermore, as Rose does not provide any prescriptives or concrete recommendations for changing the status of the working class, the reader may become disheartened about society and his/her place within it.

However, perhaps this discontentment is a starting point for discussion. Asking students to reflect on how culture changes over time, how historical movements (like Civil Rights) have changed American culture, and how an individual can make an impact might empower students. Discussions of this nature might help students identify and challenge some of their own assumptions about intelligence, class, and occupation. By building self-awareness, students will be better positioned to make both career and educational decisions. If students were able to engage with the text in a meaningful way, it is possible that they might even lead grassroots movements that would call for institutions to create a singular curriculum of both vocational and traditional academic work.

While *The Mind at Work: Valuing the Intelligence of the American Worker* makes an important contribution to educators and policy makers alike, it may not be an ideal read for new student programs. Although the author has done an excellent job highlighting assumptions made by the American public about the relationship between intelligence and occupation, this book may be too challenging for traditional-aged students who generally lack both professional and real-world experience. While the issues discussed in this text are worth incorporating into the curriculum and campus discussion, this book may not be the best platform through which to engage first-year students.