

REVIEW

Back to School

A Review by PAMELA OSMOND

BACK TO SCHOOL: WHY EVERYONE DESERVES A SECOND CHANCE AT EDUCATION

By MIKE ROSE

The New Press, New York, 2012
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The *Back to School* of the title refers to post- school or second chance education in America. Mike Rose's focus is on adult remedial (*sic*) and occupational education. However, although he writes about America, it is hard not to read this little book without a constant alternative reading of second chance learning or Technical and Further Education in the Australian context.

The book is based on interviews with a number of students and teachers in community colleges and adult education programs across America. Rose's style is anecdotal. He writes movingly of the students who have taken this second chance at learning. Australian language and literacy practitioners will recognise many of our students among the vignettes he presents to us. Rose was once a remedial teacher in the community education sector and the warmth and empathy with which he writes reflects this. The book opens with Henry telling us that 'you might discover somebody you never knew you were. That's basically what happened to me when I started taking classes here'.

Rose's style is deceptively populist. These moving vignettes are of working class and under-class Americans who are in the process of re-inventing their lives. Heart-warming stories. However, they serve to highlight a powerful political message concerning the malaise of

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much of America's adult education sector and the policies that drive it.

Through the voices of these students, Rose makes the case for the transformative effect which education can have on a sector of the population that doesn't make it to the Ivy League universities. The sub-title of the book is 'An argument for democratizing knowledge in America'. The knowledge he looks for is that which is provided by a liberal, humanist education, not that which is now offered to the already educationally disadvantaged of America.

The book is a strident lament for the shrinking possibility of a second chance at a real education for these adults 'partly because of a damaged and unstable economy but more so because of our political response to the economy' (p xiii).

It is sprinkled with case histories of people such as Henry (who discovered somebody he never knew he was). Henry was in a wheelchair, the tragic result of 'doing young, foolish, dumb stuff'. His goal now is to work with teenagers such as he once was, who are 'searching for an identity' (p 1). Some of the stories are of young people who, like Henry have been through the criminal justice system, but most are of people who for a mix of systemic and personal issues didn't do so well at school. These stories parallel closely those of our Australian students in the range of adult literacy, language or basic education classes.

Also reflected in the Australian context are the range of hurdles placed in the way of these students and potential students which include the overly bureaucratic enrolment procedures and the difficulties for educationally disadvantaged and disaffected people navigating their way through a complex web of offerings and institutions to find the course best suited to them. He argues also against reductive assumptions about learning which are reflected in the curricula, workbooks and online exercises. He sees in them an atomistic approach that has not kept pace with contemporary understandings of language and learning.

A further echo of the Australian context is Rose's description of the many short term job seeking programs offered in the community education sector. He provides a trenchant critique of the argument that an increase in basic occupational skills will lift the country's productivity. This, he sees as blame shifting and argues that this short term training in job seeking strategies or basic skills doesn't make an

appreciable difference in helping people to get a shrinking number of jobs.

Whilst accepting the argument that second-chance programs can enhance employment prospects, Rose wants to move the focus to the number of other personal, social and civic benefits that can flow from educationally rich curricula and programs.

He discusses the 'binary polemic' in the division between vocational and academic courses of study and seeks to enhance the liberal studies possibilities in a vocational curriculum, including humanistic, ethical and aesthetic dimensions. He shares with us the stories of a number of students in a particular vocational college where liberal arts electives are possible and shows us the intellectual and imaginative possibilities that this gives rise to. However, such programs are rare and the economic imperative threatens them also.

Publication of this book is timely with the OECD Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) results released in 2013. *Back to School* presents a counter to PIAAC's raw statistical data. It presents the rich data that looks to the personal stories behind the statistics. As Rose reminds us, '[In the statistical data] there's no reflection of the lady coming to class to keep her mind alert, of the man's posture changing over time as he begins to decode print' (p 53). Rose's stories demonstrate the hunger of many educationally disadvantaged people for what education promises. "To learn more ... to have a better life ... to learn new things I never thought of before' (p 69). It is unlikely that these dreams will be realised by short term job skills programs.

'What we lack in the reports', says Rose, 'is the blending of the statistical table with the portrait of a life.' *Back to School* provides that portrait.

Mike Rose's most salutary words need no further commentary:

The de facto philosophy of education we do have is a strictly economic one. This is dangerous for without a civic and moral core it could easily lead to a snazzy twenty-first-century version of an old and shameful pattern in American education: working class people get a functional education geared only toward the world of work.

For all the hope and opportunity they represent, our initiatives lack the imagination and heartbeat that transform institutions

and foster the wondrous, unrealized abilities of the full range of our citizenry. (pp 141-2)

