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Rose, Mike. *The Mind at Work: Valuing the Intelligence of the American Worker*. New York: Viking, 2004.
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Reviewed by Ildiko Mellis

For those of us who teach literacy skills to students with primary experience in the field of manual labor, Mike Rose's *The Mind at Work: Valuing the Intelligence of the American Worker* is a rare and promising find. While many teachers in our field do their homework and study alternative literacies outside the standard patterns of academic, not many of us consider studying the cognitive demands of what our students already do as waiters, carpenters, or mechanics. It is intuitive that familiarity with what these students already know would help us form better links between academic literacy and their life experiences, and *The Mind at Work* is an invaluable source for such endeavors. Written in an accessible style and with the intent of challenging "the democratic imagination" by blurring the division lines between the academic and the vocational, *The Mind at Work* should count on the interest of educators who care about equal opportunities and wish to better serve the needs of their students. In addition, Rose's special contribution to scholarship attempts to combine knowledge from traditionally segregated disciplinary sources (cognitive psychology, sociology, economics) and the personal narrative.

The Mind at Work begins with a personal note, recounting memories of Rose's family members—his mother who worked as a waitress, and his uncle and grandfather who worked for the railroad industry at different stages of its history. As Rose later explains in his last chapter "Afterword; On Methodology," the inclusion of his personal experience was motivated by his conviction, supported by some feminist theorists, that the combination of the personal with the scholarly yields unique insight into the subject examined. After a short tribute to life-long learning and intellectual curiosity in these family members' lives, Rose positions his work in a vast thicket of contradictions. He poses the puzzling question of why hard work—so "ingrained in the American cultural iconography"—has not received more attention from research to better describe the intellectual abilities it involves. Or, more generally, why is it, Rose asks, that our general understanding of intellectual abilities is constructed with such a strong bias toward the verbal and numeral domain that almost no attention is paid to the intellectual abilities manual labor requires?

Rose assumes that this overall neglect is related to a complex set of social changes and historically biased assumptions. There is a long tradition of dualism in the history of Western thought that separates the mind from the body and,

thus, manual work from cognition. Since the early days of industrialization, the general assumption was that blue-collar work does not require intellectual ability. Nowadays, with many of these jobs outsourced, the political and social influence of labor is diminishing, and our “national imagination is becoming more captured by technology, media and ‘symbolic’ analysis” (xix). Another dominant component in the bias is what Rose terms as “a number of interconnected popular beliefs about intelligence” (xxiii), namely, that it is a single, preset, consistent and numerically measurable quality that determines people’s success in life and position in the social order. These popular beliefs, Rose stresses, are not substantiated by research, and the conclusions drawn from them run against the tenets of most experts, including Alfred Binet, known as the father of intelligence testing. But *The Mind at Work* does not cover the multiple studies on intelligence. Instead, the book only expresses concerns that the way intelligence is measured and interpreted makes the intellectual abilities of blue-collar workers invisible and insignificant.

Yet, against this controversial backdrop, Rose also points out that educators talk much about successful combinations of academic and vocational training, and better preparing young people for the demands of the job market has become one of the priorities in college education.

Thus, the unfavorably biased assumptions against manual labor, the contradictory evidence of research on intelligence, and the pursuit of educators create the context for the expectations that *The Mind at Work* intends to meet. The rest of Rose’s chapters are arranged by trades—the first starting with that of the waitress, continued by the hairstylist, the plumber, the carpenter, the electrician, and the welder. In the two chapters before the conclusion, Rose wraps up the main points of his argument by comparing the high prestige professions of a surgeon or a teacher to some of the vocational trades discussed earlier. Rose’s claim is not that there is no difference between a surgeon or an electrician, but that in terms of practice, precision, and developing a critical sense of what works and what requires adjustment, both involve more similar human abilities than is commonly assumed. However, the different social evaluation of these two areas of expertise is reflected in economic terms when a surgeon’s income is five times higher than that of an electrician. Finally, Rose brings his points closer to home by examining how our educational system addresses discrepancies. He traces the history of vocational education to the 1917 Smith Hugh Act that sealed the divide between vocational and academic in particularly unsuccessful ways. The Smith Hugh Act not only led to the discrimination of minorities and women in education, but what Rose finds more concerning is that the Act maintained the cognitive division between academic and vocational skills. As a result, it is still commonly believed that manual labor does not require intellectual abilities or that the skills and knowledge involved are inferior to what is academic.

The individual chapters based on Rose’s on-site observations, study of the history of each trade, and his broad gauge reading of cognitive psychology, anthropology and economics provide several examples of the complexity of action, thinking, and problem solving in everything from serving tables to

carving window frames. Neurologist Frank Wilson's concept of "spatializing mathematics" or Richard Gregory's statement that tools embody solutions to past problems are two examples of Rose's attempts to connect his observations with scholarly work. I am one reader, however, who would have liked the scholarly research to be more visible in the book. Nevertheless, *The Mind at Work* provides enough evidence and a cogent argument that showing appreciation for the intellectual value of what our students of blue-collar background do, and providing opportunities for them to write about what they know are good ways of bridging the gap between the vocational and the academic.

