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'Lives on the Boundary' at 20

By Gerald Graff

Somebody recently suggested that politicians who oppose health-care reform have either forgotten or never known what it was like to be without medical insurance.

A parallel may exist in the educational world, where once we become experts in an academic field we forget what it was like to have been clueless about it. Becoming smart about our subjects makes us pedagogically stupid. Forgetting that there was once a time when even we—staggeringly brilliant scientist or humanist though we are—could not do long division or make sense of a sonnet, we are incurious about why students find our teachings impenetrable, and we take no responsibility for clarifying ourselves.

No writer has done more to rouse higher education from this amnesiac condition than Mike Rose, whose classic 1989 book, *Lives on the Boundary*, marks its 20th anniversary this year (Penguin released a new edition four years ago with a new afterword). The book is a sustained inquiry into what it would take to reach students who don't already "get" academe and an analysis of "the psychology of failure" that is bound up with the disadvantages of social and economic class. Rose's deep understanding of "the struggles and achievements of America's educationally underprepared," in the words of his subtitle, has made the book a well-deserved crossover success, enjoying numerous reprintings since its first appearance.

Rose tells his own story of growing up poor in a working-class section of Los Angeles and struggling with high-school and college courses that always seemed over his head. He writes, for example, about failing to grasp the distinction in a philosophical text, even after much underlining and rereading, between primary and secondary qualities. He describes his good luck in encountering a few high-school and college teachers who took him aside and revealed the secret that academe is a kind of club with special languages and rituals. Thanks to these teachers, he eventually gained the "confidence that if I stayed with material long enough

and kept asking questions, I would get it." Most of the book, however, is concerned with students who never reach that point, never crossing the "boundary" to success in academe and beyond.

Rose writes with a progressive educator's empathy for students who find the academic world daunting and humiliating. But unlike some of his fellow progressives, he never romanticizes students or suggests that we demean them if we believe they need instruction. And his goal is not to dismantle elite intellectual culture—though he is sympathetic to teaching alternative texts and ideas—but to make that culture available to as many as possible. Lastly, in contrast to current advocates of "teaching for social justice," democratic education for Rose isn't a euphemism for converting students to progressive politics.

In fact, rereading *Lives on the Boundary*, I was taken by the convergence of Rose's criticism of the university with that made by recent education conservatives. Most strikingly, Rose's argument was echoed by that *bête noir* of the left, Margaret Spellings, former secretary of education, who complained in a famous 2006 report that "most colleges and universities don't accept responsibility for making sure that those they admit actually succeed." I'll come back to this point, but I wish that in his afterword Rose had acknowledged his common ground with conservatives on the need for standards and accountability.

Rose's common response to cries for education standards is that such standards are fair only if all students are given the help they need to meet them, as is far from the case in today's failing schools. For college instructors, being fair would mean, among other things, seeing student mistakes as a stage of development rather than a symptom of cognitive deficiency or hopeless illiteracy. Like Mina Shaughnessy, whose classic book, *Errors and Expectations*, he frequently cites, Rose recognizes that mistakes can be intelligent, that an error that "crops up because a student is trying new things is a valuable kind of error, a sign of growth." Colleges, however, often fail to build on the potential reflected in such errors and classify struggling students as remedial in ways that deepen their sense of inferiority. Completing a vicious circle, the popular media depict student errors as symptoms of cultural collapse, and this alarmist attitude in turn fuels the current obsession with testing.

One of the strongest aspects of Rose's book for me is his demonstration that professors fail to identify the misconceptions about academic work that cause students to fail. Noting that "it is not unusual for students to come to the university with

conceptualizations of disciplines that are out of sync with academic reality," he argues that the college curriculum is often "a litany of misdirection" that increases the "dissonance between the academy's and the students' definition of disciplines." This dissonance makes it "hard for students to get their bearings with material: to know what's important, to see how the pieces fit together, to follow an argument, to have a sense of what can be passed over lightly." He writes of students who desperately try to copy down everything a lecturer says—as he once did—since they have no way of distinguishing the crucial from the incidental. "The special nature" of academic demands, Rose writes, "is not made the focus of attention that it should be," and courses "are not taught explicitly and self-consciously as courses on how to think as a chemist or psychologist or a literary critic."

All too true, I think. Indeed, undergraduate liberal education itself has often operated on the self-fulfilling premise that thinking "as a chemist or psychologist or a literary critic"—joining the academic club—is something that only careerist graduate students would have any reason to do. And the longer we work in a system in which most undergraduates don't join the academic club, the easier it becomes to justify teaching mainly to the top 10 percent and letting the rest fend for themselves. Instead of discussing what it would take to let all students in on what Rose calls "the secret talk ... the shared concepts and catchphrases of Western liberal learning," we rationalize that if students remain outsiders to the club, it is their problem, not ours.

Rose argues that to change course "we need an orientation ... that provides guidance on how to determine and honor the beliefs and stories, enthusiasms, and apprehensions that students reveal." This Deweyan advice to start where the students already are may sound like a plea to dumb down the curriculum, but for Rose it simply recognizes that to teach anything successfully, we have to build on what the learner already knows and thinks. Some of the book's best vignettes describe students who find many of the assumptions of academe profoundly counterintuitive but get little help in grasping them.

Take Lucia, for example, a single working mother who is unfairly written off as a "poor reader" because her working-class Roman Catholicism prevents her from understanding an assigned essay that debunks Freudianism by calling it a religion. Then there is Scott, who refuses to enter a debate in a science class over "a finite versus an infinite universe" because, as he sees it, "This is the kind

of question ... that you'll argue and argue about. It's stupid. No one wins. So why do it?" As Rose observes, "university professors have for so long been socialized into the critical stance required to join such discussions "that they don't realize how unsettling it can be to students who don't share their unusual background." As brilliant as those professors are in dissecting all things, they often show little understanding of "what it means to be underprepared" in their own world.

But this brings me back to my wish that Rose had noted the convergence between his critique of higher education and that of conservatives who call for well-defined educational standards and accountability. In his afterword, Rose considers such demands and their problematic impact on schools since his book's original publication, but he responds to them only by rehearsing familiar complaints about testing. He thus misses an opportunity to make the case implied by his own critique of education for a more intelligent view of standards and accountability.

Rose complains that real education gets left out when reforms are driven solely by "concern about economic readiness" and work-force competitiveness, that "reforms that have high-stakes tests as their centerpiece can lead to the narrowing of curriculum to fit the tests." It's true that the tests mandated by the No Child Left Behind Act have often resulted in classrooms that are mind-numbingly boring and irrelevant to students. But if Rose is right that colleges hide the secrets of academic success from many students, and if this obfuscation trickles down to the schools, then calls for greater accountability are not only justified but badly overdue.

Rose does concede that "it is crucial to have some means of quality control," but he says nothing about how educational quality control might be carried out and comes across generally as defensive about it. Rose also fails to mention that it is conservatives who take quality control most seriously while many of his allies on the educational left either see no need for it or debunk the very idea as ideologically suspect.

To find Rose defending standards against attacks on them from the educational left, one has to go to other writings he has published since the first appearance of *Lives on the Boundary*. In one essay, for example, in the 2006 collection *An Open Language* (St. Martin's Press), Rose clearly has the educational left in mind when he says that "people leery about calls for standards need to remember their benefits and reclaim them for democratic ends, despite the fact that standards and assessments in the past too

often have been used to stratify students into educational tracks based more on economic and racial background than on academic ability." Yes—reclaim standards "for democratic ends" instead of dismissing them as repressive! In his afterword, however, we hear only about how standards and assessments are "used to stratify students" by social class, and nothing about the need to reclaim those things for democratic ends.

As great a book as *Lives on the Boundary* is, I think Rose's work would speak even more usefully to our present situation if he came out more aggressively and publicly for the democratic reclamation of educational standards and accountability that follows from his analysis, even if doing that would mean saying things that some of his political allies won't want to hear. With his rare grasp of the academic world and why many students fail in it, Rose would be in a position to show current policy makers how to get standards and assessment right. But those policy makers aren't likely to listen to any of us in higher education as long as our response to standards is more defensive than opportunistic.

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