

Adam Sprague

Book Review: *Back to School: Why Everyone Deserves a Second Chance at Education, An Argument for Democratizing Knowledge in America.*

Discussed in this review:

Rose, Mike. *Back to School: Why Everyone Deserves a Second Chance at Education, An Argument for Democratizing Knowledge in America.* New York: The New Press, 2012. Print.

In *Back to School: Why Everyone Deserves a Second Chance at Education*, Mike Rose argues that because our US workforce structures and needs have changed, "the non-traditional student is becoming the norm" (8). These students are older, working students who often enroll in adult education programs and community colleges, institutions typically not included in critical commentaries on the state of higher education in the US today (6). Rose argues further that adult education programs and community colleges offer an important public policy response to US workforce changes resulting from a globalized economy. Unskilled jobs are no longer as widely available as they were fifty years ago, while skilled and unskilled jobs are being restructured, automated, and outsourced. One important public policy response is the offering of public college classes for adults seeking new occupations, career advancement, and college degrees.

In each chapter, Rose focuses on an issue related to nontraditional students, adult education and community colleges, all the while effectively rendering images of classrooms, tutoring centers, instructors, adult students, and learning experiences

observed in many "second chance" educational institutions. As a result of Rose's compelling stories and narrative style, readers are afforded opportunities to feel as though they, too, have entered classrooms filled with incredibly diverse students working to attain General Educational Development diplomas, trade certificates, college degrees and English language proficiencies.

Rose narrates several student stories with a similar plotline—individuals who are struggling to survive academia while striving to overcome educational barriers. Among these individuals is a student whose exhaustion in class results from the night shift he just completed, a young woman whose effort to write is related to her deeper effort to live with depression, and a homeless student without reliable transportation. Although these students typically voice frustration with difficult and often confusing institutional requirements and protocols, when they do complete their degrees, these graduates generally report having improved their job prospects and enriched their minds—an observation Rose offers to debunk the theory that community colleges ignore liberal arts and sciences and focus too heavily on job skills preparation. In other words, Rose argues, for many non-traditional students, returning to school does represent job preparation and career advancement but it also provides a chance at living more fulfilling lives and becoming more effective citizens.

As for basic writing courses, Rose argues that current protocols testing and placing students in classes result in "some [students]—more than you might think—[being] misplaced" (82). Rose reports that in one class, "hardly anyone knew about the [placement] test beforehand, and no one prepared for it" (83). Poor test-taking skills (as opposed to general reading and writing competencies) are cited as a key reason for nontraditional student placement in basic writing classes. When, at the beginning of a

semester, several students were asked about obstacles to passing basic writing, students frequently expressed concerns about financial resources. While students enrolled in all types of college often have reason to worry about finances, students enrolled in public community colleges are most likely to come from low-income communities with poorly funded public schools. More specifically, non-traditional students may perform poorly on exams and write weak essays because they often lack money needed for transportation, child care, Internet service, or a cab ride to a local library to check email and contact an instructor. In short, Rose argues, student access (or lack of access) to key resources plays a major role in academic performance.

To improve adult education programs and community colleges, Rose proposes an increased focus on these institutions by scholars and greater attention to improving educational services and structures, e.g., orientation programs, course numbering systems, and campus designs. Faculty development meetings and professional workshops also deserve increased attention: despite the difficulties with scheduling meetings for overworked instructors, faculty meetings and workshops offer important forums for discussing teaching and curricula.

The book's primary target audience is educators; however, *Back to School* could also provide an enriching common reading experience for undergraduates and graduate students. Basic writing students and instructors are likely to relate to the student narratives and classroom scenes described by Rose. In fact, by reading and discussing sections of *Back to School*, nontraditional students might well become motivated to participate in class discussions, collective research projects, and writing assignments related to topics that concern them as returning students struggling to succeed. In "Ch. Six Improving the People's College," Rose reminds readers of how

important teachers can be in the lives of their students and suggests specific activities teachers can engage in to become more responsive to their students' needs as learners.

As a critique of postsecondary education and a call for greater attention to nontraditional educational programs, *Back to School* offers a thoughtful, well-informed, and compassionate commentary on existing second chance programs. As a commentary on nontraditional students, *Back to School* reminds readers that there is often more than meets the eye in the abilities and experiences of struggling students—and how we work to meet and assist those struggling students could make the difference not only in their academic careers but also in their lives, in the lives of their children, and in our prospects for movement toward a more just social world.

Adam Sprague

Adam Sprague is a PhD student and Instructor of English for speakers of other languages at Bowling Green State University.