Leveled Reading Mentor Texts:

Reading 1: Professor X, Teaching Remedial Writing, More than a Paycheck

**Level: High**

Several years ago, a magazine published an essay by “Professor X” complaining about the quality of “non-traditional” students who he believes are academically underprepared to go to college. I also wrote this letter to the magazine in response to Professor X.

*Dear Editor:*

*Like Professor X, I too am frustrated. However, I am not frustrated by the nontraditional students going to college, but by the negative comments made about these students by Professor X. Almost every time “nontraditional” college students appear in the pages of magazines, they are represented as failures who are unable to be successful in college.*

*I taught writing and literature for a number of years in a variety of programs for nontraditional students. Some didn’t do so well, but many did. Professor X seems to understand the struggles his students have with his curriculum, but instead of looking at his own curriculum, he blames the students. For example, he has students write a research paper, something most students will not do after college. He should appreciate students’ backgrounds and career goals by creating assignments that will be more meaningful to them. Professor X is mistaken about the intelligence of his “nontraditional” students. He believes that they are not intelligent because they have not read many books and look bored in class. But these people are intelligent. They have to solve problems daily; balance their work, school and family lives; write and read as part of their jobs or hobbies. Professor X does not acknowledge these skills.*

*There are a lot of people who enter college unprepared. But their stores are more complex, more varied, and many times richer than traditional students.*

*They deserve our respect.*

*Mike Rose*

**Level: Middle**

*Dear Editor,*

*Several years ago, “Professor X” published an article about “non-traditional” students because he believed they were not prepared to go to college. I wrote this letter to the magazine in response to Professor X.*

*Professor X may be frustrated, but I am I am more frustrated by the negative comments made about these students. Almost every time “nontraditional” college students appear in the pages of magazines, they are represented as failures who are unable to be successful in college.*

*I taught writing and literature for many years to nontraditional students. Many students did well, but some did not do so well. Professor X blames the students instead of looking at his own curriculum. For example, he has students write a research paper for his class. Most students will not write research papers after college. Instead, he should appreciate students’ backgrounds and career goals by creating assignments that are more meaningful to them. These people are intelligent. They have to solve problems daily; balance their work, school and family lives; write and read as part of their jobs or hobbies. Professor X does not acknowledge these skills.*

*There are a lot of people who enter college unprepared. But their life stories are more complex, more varied, and many times richer than traditional students.*

*They deserve our respect.*

*Mike Rose*

**Level: Low**

Several years ago “Professor X” published an article about “non-traditional” students. He believed that they are not prepared to go to college. I wrote to this letter to the magazine in response to Professor X.

*Dear Editor:*

 *I do not agree with Professor X. He believes that they are not intelligent because they have not read many books and look bored in class. I believe that “non-traditional” students have a lot of abilities that will make them successful in college. They have to solve problems daily; balance their work, school and family lives; write and read as part of their jobs or hobbies. Professor X must understand their special skills. His assignments should include the backgrounds, interests, and history of these students so that it is meaningful to them. There are a lot of people who are not prepared for college. It is important to understand their backgrounds, interests, and history to support them in college.*

*They deserve our respect.*

*Mike Rose*

Reading #2 *Teaching Remedial Writing*

An Excerpt from the Mike Rose blog Tuesday, July 8, 2008

**Level: High**:

Kevin was very similar to a lot of young men from my old neighborhood in Los Angeles. He was a good student who attended a poor school. His school had old textbooks, and very few resources. The teachers at his school would teach for a short time and then leave the school. There were always teachers leaving and new teachers coming. Sometimes Kevin would get into trouble, just like the other boys in his neighborhood. When he was 16 years old, he spent many months in a youth jail (prison). Kevin did get out of jail. After jail he went back to school. He worked hard and he graduated. He did very poorly on the SAT examination (the test students take to go to college.)

There was a special program at his college. It allowed students with low grades to

When Kevin began college, he had to take an exam. His exam had several grammar mistakes. It was not organized well. It also did not include enough specific examples.

Politicians, professors and other people often say that students like Kevin should not be able to attend college. They believe that students like Kevin make our colleges weak. Only students with strong skills should be allowed to attend college. It is true that Kevin’s writing skills are poor. If his skills did not improve, he would probably not graduate.

Students like Kevin are assigned to very basic writing classes called remedial classes (Basic Skills). In remedial classes, students complete simple grammar assignments. Some professors who teach remedial classes believe that their students are not able to do challenging assignments. They believe that their students must know every individual, basic skill before they can be given challenging and interesting assignments.

Other people believe that remedial courses should be different. Students like Kevin have low writing skills, but they are very capable and intelligent. Students in these new remedial courses talk and read about events and ideas that are important to them. For example, they write papers about poetry, literature, and current events. They share their ideas with their classmates. They listen to their classmates opinions. The students in these new remedial classes show great improvement.

Some people believe that remedial classes are a waste of time and money.

Students should have learned the first time that they took the course. Many researchers want to change the meaning of remedial classes. They want to provide students with a new way to learn the same material that they did not learn before. For some students the chance to learn again is a life-time opportunity.

**Level: Middle**

Kevin was from my old neighborhood in Los Angeles. He was a good student who went to a poor school. His school had old textbooks. The teachers at his school would leave after teaching only for a short time. Sometimes Kevin would get into trouble. When he was 16 years old, he spent many months in jail. Kevin did get out of jail. After jail he went back to school. He worked hard and he graduated. He did not do well on his exam to go to college. He was put in a class for students who did not score well on this exam.

When Kevin began college, he had several grammar mistakes. He could not organize his ideas well. He did not know how to write specific examples about his ideas. Some people think that students like Kevin should not be able to attend college. Only students with strong skills should be allowed to attend college. If Kevin’s skills do not improve, he would probably not graduate.

Students like Kevin take remedial classes where they have to learn basic English writing skills. Some professors who teach remedial classes believe that their students are not able to do challenging work. They believe that their students must know every basic skill before they can do challenging and interesting assignments.

Other people believe that remedial courses should be the opposite. Students like Kevin are intelligent and can develop their writing skills. They can write about events and ideas that are important to them. The professor can work on the basic skills to help them with their ideas. The student’s in these classes show great improvement.

Some people believe that remedial classes are a waste of time and money. But, many researchers want to change the meaning of remedial classes. They want to provide students with an interesting way to learn the basic skills. This is a very important opportunity for them.

**Level: Low**

Kevin grew up in Los Angeles. He was a good student. His school was poor. His school books were old. His school did not have a lot. Every year, many teachers left his school. Every year many new teachers would come to his school. Kevin got in trouble when he was 16 years old. He had to go to jail for many months.

Kevin did get out of jail. After jail he went back to school. He worked hard and he graduated. He wanted to go to college. He took a test. He did not do well on the test. There was a special program at his college. It allowed students with low grades to come to the college.

Kevin took his first test in college. His test had many mistakes. Many people say that students like Kevin should not go to college. Only students with high scores should go to college.

Students like Kevin have to take basic skills classes. They learn grammar rules and simple vocabulary for reading and writing. In basic skills classes, students do not do interesting or challenging work. They focus only on basic skills.

Some people believe that basic skills classes can be different. Students like Kevin have low writing skills, but they have great ideas. They can think. They can share their ideas with their classmates. They can write about important things. The ideas come first. The teacher can help them improve their skills.

Some people believe that basic skills classes are a waste of time and money. These class are not a waste of time and money. They can be important. They must focus on student’s intelligence and not only on their weaknesses.

Reading #3 *More Than a Paycheck*

An Excerpt from the Mike Rose Blog Thursday, September 2, 2010

**Level: High**

I am sitting in on an orientation to a vocational program at an urban community college that draws on one of the poorest populations in the city. The students in this program have had pretty sketchy educations, and they read, write and calculate at a ninth grade level or below. The program will both help them improve those skills as well as provide occupational training. If ever there was a population suited for the economic appeal, it is this one. They desperately need a leg up.

The director of the program stands at a desk and lectern at the front of a large classroom. The walls are bare, no windows, institutional cream, clean and spare. Behind her is an expansive white board; in front are 25 or so students sitting quietly in no particular order in plastic chairs at eight long tables. The students are black and Latino, a few more women than men, most appear to be in their early 20s to early 30s, with one man, who looks like he’s had a hard time of it, in his mid-40s.

“Welcome to college, “ the director is saying, “I congratulate you.” She then asks them, one by one, to talk about what motivates them and why they’re here. There is some scraping of chairs, shifting of bodies, and the still life animates.

The economic motive does loom large. One guy laughs, “I don’t want to work a crappy job all my life.” A woman in the back announces that she wants to get her GED “to get some money to take care of myself.” What is interesting, though -- and I wish the president and his secretary could hear it -- are all the other reasons people give for being here: to “learn more,” to be a “role model for my kids,” to get “a career to support my daughter,” to “have a better life.” The director gets to the older man. “I’m illiterate,” he says in a halting voice, “and I want to learn to read and write.”

The semester before, students also wrote out their reasons for attending the program -- as this current cohort will soon have to do -- and their range of responses was even wider. Again, the economic motive was key, but consider these comments, some written in neat cursive, some in scratchy uneven (and sometimes error-ridden) print: “learning new things I never thought about before”; “I want my kids too know that I can write and read”; “Hope Fully with this program I could turn my life around”; “to develop better social skills and better speech”; “I want to be somebody in this world”; “I like to do test and essay like it is part of my life.”

Over the past eight years I’ve been studying the cognitive demands of physical work. That includes comparatively high-end jobs such as surgery and physical therapy, but mostly blue-collar and service occupations, such as plumbing and hair styling — the kind of occupations the people we just heard from hope to enter. Our society tends to make sharp and weighty distinctions between white collar and blue collar occupations, between brain work and hand work, “neck up and neck down” jobs, as one current aphorism has it.

But what I’ve found as I’ve closely examined physical work is its significant, intellectual content. This content is no surprise if we consider the surgeon, but the carpenter and the hair stylist and the welder, too, are constantly solving problems, applying concepts, making decisions on the fly. A lot of our easy characterizations about work just don’t hold up under scrutiny. Hand and brain are cognitively connected.

While doing this research, I’ve spent a lot of time in high school and college vocational programs watching people gain expertise. These observations have given me a valuable perspective on current economic and education policy aimed at getting young and no-so-young people back to school, particularly those who are academically underprepared and typically come from a lower-middle class to working-class backgrounds.

People, affluent as well as poor, go back to school for all kinds of reasons, but our current policy incentives and the rhetoric that frames them don’t capture this rich web of motives.

**Level: Middle**

**Reasons People Decide to Go to College**

“Welcome to college, “ the director is saying, “I congratulate you.” She then asks them, one by one, to talk about what motivates them and why they’re here. There is some scraping of chairs, shifting of bodies, and the still life animates. One guy laughs, “I don’t want to work a crappy job all my life.” A woman in the back announces that she wants to get her GED “to get some money to take care of myself.” What is interesting, though are all the other reasons people give for being here: to “learn more,” to be a “role model for my kids,” to get “a career to support my daughter,” to “have a better life.” The director gets to the older man. “I’m illiterate,” he says in a halting voice, “and I want to learn to read and write.”

The semester before, students also wrote out their reasons for attending the program. Again, the economic motive was key, but consider these comments, some written in neat cursive, some in scratchy uneven (and sometimes error-ridden) print: “learning new things I never thought about before”; “I want my kids too know that I can write and read”; “Hope Fully with this program I could turn my life around”; “to develop better social skills and better speech”; “I want to be somebody in this world”; “I like to do test and essay like it is part of my life.”

**Defining Intelligence: All Jobs Require Thinking**

Over the past eight years I’ve been studying the cognitive demands of physical work. That includes comparatively high-end jobs such as surgery and physical therapy, but mostly blue-collar and service occupations, such as plumbing and hair styling. Our society tends to make sharp and weighty distinctions between white collar and blue collar occupations, or between brain work and hand work, or “neck up and neck down” jobs. As I have closely examined physical work I have learned that it has significant intellectual content. Therefore, intelligence is not only associated with “neck up” jobs (eg. doctor, engineer, lawyer, professor), but is an important part of physical jobs as well. For example, the carpenter, the hair stylist and the welder, too, are constantly solving problems, applying concepts, making decisions on the fly [quickly and naturally]. Contrary to what people think, physical work also requires a lot of intellectual ability. The hands and the mind are connected.

**Benefit of Education is More than Economic**

People, affluent as well as poor, go back to school for all kinds of reasons. As we just read, people sign up for educational programs for economic reasons but also because further education touches their minds, hearts, and sense of who they are and who they want to become.

**Level: Low**

**Reasons People Decide to Go to College**

 The director of a college welcomes the students and asks them about their reasons for going to college. One student says that he wants a better job. Another student wants to learn more and be a better role model for her children. An older man says that he wants to read and write.

**Defining Intelligence: All Jobs Require Thinking**

Over the past eight years I studied about the meaning of intelligence. In our society, people often believe that doctors, lawyers, engineers and professors are intelligent. However, carpenters, hairstylists and the welders are constantly solving problems making decisions, too. Contrary to what people think, physical work also requires a lot of intellectual ability.

**Benefit of Education is More than Economic**

Both rich and poor people go back to school for many reasons. People sign up for educational programs to earn more money and get a better job, but also because further education makes them feel good about themselves.