

Making Class Visible

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Carter, Genesee M., and William H. Thelin, editors. *Class in the Composition Classroom: Pedagogy and the Working Class*. Utah State UP, 2017. 363 pages.

Working in postsecondary classrooms for nearly two decades has facilitated a growing class consciousness in my teaching, scholarship, and community engagement. As a TA eighteen years ago, I didn't know how to effectively engage and teach rural working-class students at my state university. Were they ill-prepared? Why couldn't they write in standard English? Do they belong here? Looking back, I'm sure my professors were asking the same things about me. Years later, I faced similar circumstances when I taught in a majority minority neighborhood, one that was poor and working class. My students were bringing different experiences, gifts, and languages to my classroom. Was I ready to receive these gifts? Was I ready to teach these students? No. Are most of us who teach writing? My guess is no.

Class is taboo and under researched. We don't talk about class. It didn't come up in my first graduate degree. And even though I am a first-generation college graduate, the son of a printer and bookkeeper, I didn't have any idea about how class shaped my academic experiences and life until years after I entered a university as an undergraduate. I am not alone. When asked, most Americans would say they are middle class. This is surprising given the increasing income inequality in the United States. Michael Zweig makes a compelling argument that Americans are majority working class. For writing teachers, these facts bring up important questions for the design of our programs and courses as well as our own pedagogy. We might ask: if class is taboo and invisible, how do I develop my pedagogy to serve these students rather than force middle-class assimilation onto them? How do I help them develop a literacy that honors where they are from rather than dismisses it? It is imperative that we develop an awareness that most stu-

dents in first-year writing classes are working class and have been shaped by the great recession and widening income inequality, and most importantly, that it is our work to meet and serve these students in the classroom.

Carter and Thelin's collection *Class in the Composition Classroom: Pedagogy and the Working Class* begins to frame out answers to these questions. The editors argue that "education, especially composition studies, must respond to features of teaching that subtly or blatantly alienate working-class students and set up further obstacles for them to overcome in order to succeed" (9). This argument is exigent as austerity measures reduce funding for students and as rhetorics of completion and persistence come to dominate some of our discussions. This volume directly addresses class as an important, and overlooked, component of these discussions. Moreover, the collection is an important contribution to the conversation about the praxis of writing instruction—how our teaching and research form an important reciprocal cycle.

Frankly, this collection is one I wish I had as a graduate student all those years ago. It would have been a revelation. For me, a key audience for this book is graduate students. Many graduate students do not come from the working class and are in graduate programs because they have the literacies of the academy—thus, they may not come to the work of teaching writing with the awareness or skills to teach all students, especially working-class students who inhabit their classrooms. This volume represents an important contribution to the field because it provides the context graduate students and perhaps many of our colleagues need to serve our increasingly diverse students. The volume accomplishes two goals. First, it examines class, which is undertheorized and needs more attention. In the afterword, Zebroski asserts that this work is a "return to social class, tracking its changes, updating and complicating concepts of social class and class identity" (321). This claim is borne out, as is an intersectional examination of class. One of the strengths in Carter and Thelin's work on class is that they define and allow for competing definitions of class. The introduction itself is an excellent contribution to the field and is something that I would want new TAs and all community college instructors to read. Two-year college instructors do not always have the benefit of being resourced to have a WPA or even having what they recognize as a writing program. This volume provides sorely needed context for two-year college instructors and two-year writing courses as these are the institutions and professors who teach the most working-class and first-generation students. Second, it concentrates mostly on first-year writing, which as Carolyn Calhoun-Dillahunt said in her 2018 CCCC chair's address is central to our discipline and professions. First-year writing is often a gatekeeping course. And it is the only course

that exists in some fashion at nearly every institution. We must understand how our work in these classes invites or alienates our students.

In many of the chapters, the contributors undertake the work of examining a nuanced intersectional framework of class. In Aaron Barlow and Patrick Corbett's chapter "Implications of Redefining 'Working-Class' in the Urban Composition Classroom," the authors examine the "social reality" of their students, noting that first year composition is "complicated by a hidden, but acute, divide between how class (particularly the working class) is addressed institutionally and as part of pedagogy" (60–61). These authors call on faculty to "recognize the extent of difference" with working-class urban students (61). While this phrase doesn't seem to be intersectional at first glance, the authors spend time defining who these students are, noting that students at their school arrive from 138 countries and are racially diverse. What ties these students together, though, is their socioeconomic class position. Barlow and Corbett go on to say the faculty at their school value "cross-cultural competencies" but that that valuation turns to frustration when matters of class are considered (62). Our view is incomplete. After teaching in an urban community college for eight years, the authors' assertion that "within this cluster of material, ideological, and cultural conditions, implementing the best pedagogical advances of our field is an ongoing challenge" rings true (63). For the authors, a successful pedagogy is one that includes the totality of the student, including their class position. It is this perspective that moves our pedagogy to a more complete and holistic footing.

Continuing with an intersectional look at class is Brett Griffiths and Christie Toth's chapter "Rethinking Class: Poverty, Pedagogy, and Two-Year College Writing Programs." The chapter examines two case studies, one in a two-year college outside of Detroit and the other a two-year tribal college in the southwest United States. They look at the educational impact of poverty in two-year college composition classrooms. The authors coin the phrase "poverty effects," which I think is more intellectually honest than "noncognitive issues," a term which has come to cover the source of low persistence and completion in developmental education and two-year colleges. Griffiths and Toth define "poverty effects" as "the combined social, emotional, and material impacts of poverty that can disproportionately influence the behaviors, learning, and other academic performances of working-class and working-poor students" (231). This definition is comprehensive and is an important frame for understanding the challenges of teaching students affected by this environment. The case studies examine how few instructors even use the word poverty to describe the conditions in which their students lived. Griffiths and Toth examine instructors'

responses to poverty and found that accommodation was the most frequent response, “most commonly through flexible course policies” (247). Their findings point to a need for structural responses to poverty rather than “heroic” actions of individual teachers. Importantly, they note the challenge of providing a systemic response in part due to funding, but also because “such initiatives [are] contingent on consistent efforts to make a continuously changing student body aware of what is available, which in turn depends on an informed, engaged, and stable faculty willing and able to connect students with these resources” (254–55). This point seems especially important to WPAs who manage large numbers of contingent faculty or graduate students. How do we create stable systemic responses to class in shifting conditions, many of which are out of faculty control?

In addition to an intersectional lens on class, the volume has contributions that look at the histories and norms working-class students bring to the classroom. Cori Brewster in “Social Economies of Literacy in Rural Oregon: Accounting for Diverse Sponsorship Histories of Working-Class Students in and Out of School” looks to the history and location of working-class students’ literacies. Brewster came to this research from two angles—first, she and her colleagues were aware that they didn’t know enough about the kind of writing experiences students had before they came to her campus. Second, she undertook this research as a way of providing a more nuanced portrait of literacy, one that was elided in her state’s big data assessment. Brewster applies Deborah Brandt’s theory of literacy sponsors here because it is “especially useful in describing the diversity and complexity of rural students’ literacies across the United States” (213).

Brewster interviewed 52 students for her study and reports a complex range of literacy sponsorship, ranging from students who self-sponsored and resisted traditional school literacy to students who were sponsored by their teachers and who were more easily initiated into secondary education. Brewster’s analysis leads her to assert that student literacies and themes are diverse and that sometimes instructors have “broad and ill-informed assumptions about rural and working-class students that still so often surface in legislative, institutional, and classroom contexts” (226). She goes on to say that teachers must consider the diverse literacies which students bring to the classroom and to make sure that we foster an awareness of the “real consequences for students” that emerge from our “indexing rural to illiterate” (227). Brewster’s second suggestion is to make visible “at all levels” assessment and the systems and structures underlying them. These suggestions and her nuancing of working-class and rural literacy are valuable for WPAs, especially as a way to make literacies visible to administrators and legislators beyond mere quantitative data.

Likewise, Middleton's chapter on the alienation narrative of working-class students looks at working-class students' identities. Middleton engages with Donna LeCourt's work on the "alienation narrative," extending this work by examining how institutions need to serve the student rather than assimilate them into middle-class cultural norms (179). The author draws upon a body of scholarship on interdependent and independent norms. Middleton points to the privileging of independence as a cultural value in the university, but interdependence as a cultural norm of first generation students. To help develop the value of interdependence, she created a course called "Writing as Advocacy." In it "students adopted the subject role of advocate and were asked to read, write, and act on another's behalf" (179). For Middleton, the work of this course, while complex for the students, allows the class to address the alienation narrative. The attention to identity that Brewster and Middleton's chapters foster is important for our students and for the work of writing studies because it focuses our work on students who are often left behind.

Overall, this collection is an important contribution to the field and brings class to the conversation in a way that I haven't seen in composition studies. The book's chapters cover an impressive range of topics, including literacy, adult education, the two-year college, identity, and pedagogy. Further, it takes seriously the voices of students. This collection is of value to graduate students and instructors alike. The collection is impressive in its attention to nuanced thinking about class and in its focus on first-year writing. Further, it's of special value to WPAs because people in that role contend with professional development, issues of pedagogy, and resources in environments that are often difficult. Two-year colleges and other access-intensive institutions where the large majority of working-class students begin their postsecondary education will be able to use this book to great benefit. This volume raises the visibility of working-class students and values them; thus reframing how we teach and interact with our students so that we are mindful of the literacies, differences, and gifts our intersectional working-class 21st century students bring is a matter of best practice and a matter of justice and equity.

WORKS CITED

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