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## INTRODUCTION

William H. Thelin and Genesea M. Carter

Travis, eighteen, had just started his first year at the University of Wisconsin–Stout. An undeclared major at Wisconsin’s only polytechnic, he came to UW–Stout hoping to major in something practical. He chose Stout because it is a few hours’ drive from home, the people were friendly during his campus visit, the college town was small, and his application was accepted. Travis, like many of the students at UW–Stout, is from a small rural farming community and does not know what he wants to do yet. He is pretty sure he wants to stay in Wisconsin and maybe become a manager of a local Menard’s, a regional home-improvement box store, or own a construction company back in his hometown.

Travis grew up on a family farm. In high school he worked twenty to thirty hours a week helping his parents with the farm. During the summers, he also got a job at the local 3M factory. His parents, Bob and Jackie, both graduated from high school and spent a few years at the technical college although they never attended a four-year university. Their expectations were always for Travis to get a bachelor’s degree and find a job that would pay him more than the hourly wages at 3M, the best-paying job within a few hours’ drive. But they did not want Travis to move too far away; they wanted to keep the family together.

Like many working-class students, reading and writing are not all that interesting to Travis. He has little experience in reading for pleasure, and his parents never took him to the library as a kid. In fact, he stopped reading for fun altogether in the third grade and, instead, started hunting, playing hockey, and fishing. Writing is something he associates with homework and English papers. He thinks of himself as an okay reader or writer, but he would rather be doing something else.

Travis does enjoy his English 101 class at UW–Stout, however. The professor is engaging and interesting, and Travis especially enjoys the fact that he does not have to write any literary essays in this course. The most difficult part of the course for him, however, is how time consuming writing is. He is expected to write rough drafts, participate in peer reviews and conferences, and then revise his drafts before submitting them. And

Travis is not completely convinced that the time and effort is really worth it. He is not going to become a writer, after all. Besides, none of his family members are writers, and they all have jobs. Travis approaches English 101 like many students do: he puts in the effort to try to get the grade he wants, but he is not convinced English 101 can benefit him much. Thinking about the applicability of English 101 beyond the grade is not something Travis has done—or knows how to do—yet.

Teaching students with Travis's background and mindset requires that writing instructors develop an awareness of and appreciation for the diverse factors that shape the students who enter their classrooms. For instructors like us who teach working-class students—whether at institutions that draw a heavy percentage of working-class students or at institutions where working-class students are blended into classrooms with middle- and upper-class students—there is a need for “developing both awareness of working-class culture and an effective working-class pedagogy,” writes Sherry Lee Linkon.<sup>1</sup> Awareness of working-class students' needs coupled with an effective pedagogy, Linkon suggests, “better[s] our chances of engaging and inspiring them.”<sup>2</sup>

Although Travis's story represents one type of working-class student, there are many working-class students who do not resemble Travis. Some working-class students come from households with parents who have bachelor degrees; some working-class students live in urban and suburban areas; some working-class students are resistant writers; and some working-class students love writing and their English classes. The variance in the descriptor *working-class student* makes the term particularly difficult to define, as many other working-class scholars have illustrated.

#### WORKING-CLASS STUDENT DEFINITION

We cannot speak of a “working class” in American life or among student populations without understanding the underlying class system. Yet, *class* is a contested term. Definitions range from those based purely on the type of job a person holds (blue collar versus white collar) to those that see a systemic relationship between classes determined by who controls the means of production. Theorists clash about whether the lived experience of a given group of people is more important in understanding class than what Max Weber called the “life chances” of those same people,<sup>3</sup> or the “cultural capital” they might wield, as Alvin Gouldner first suggested.<sup>4</sup> Much is made of the existence of a middle class, which, if a distinct class and not just a form of worker, clouds some tenets of traditional Marxist theory.

Furthermore, *class* can be used casually, as when a person says that a breach of etiquette showed “no class” on the part of the perpetrator. *High class* is associated with elegance and dignity, if not necessarily wealth. *Low class* refers to coarse or inappropriate behavior. Such common usage confuses the issue of class and what it means to be working class. We will not pretend here that we have arrived at a definitive answer to the question of definition. Contributors to this book also disagree with each other. But we can review important understandings that influence our conception of the working class, moving from the systemic forms of class to the characteristics of students we might see in our classrooms.

Michael Parenti divides classes into two categories or columns, A and B. He describes those in column A as living mostly “off other people’s labor.”<sup>5</sup> They might have a salaried position, but that is not their main source of income. He further states that in this class,

there are several hundred thousand adults . . . who do not work, not because they are retired or infirm or unemployed or institutionalized or raising children. They do not work because they do not have to. They have what we call “private” or “independent” incomes; that is, they get enough money to live—usually quite well—from the money they possess. Their money does not come from their own labor but the labor of others.<sup>6</sup>

Column B, he explains, contains the other 98 percent of humanity “who live principally off wages, salaries, bonuses, fees, commissions, and pensions.”<sup>7</sup> They might have some savings or investments, but that income is not enough to live on. While this group as a class does not share a culture or an identity—they are not consciously aware of being in this class—the labor of its members creates the incomes for both column A and column B.

Parenti feels this relationship is exploitive, not symbiotic. He documents that the ruling class (column A) maintains its hold over this working class (column B) through a

supporting network of doctrines, values, myths, and institutions that are not normally thought of as political . . . these supportive institutions help create the ideology that transforms a ruling-class interest into a “general interest,” justifying existing class relations as natural and optimal social arrangements.<sup>8</sup>

Parenti acknowledges many differences among those he categorizes into column B, but it is clear he believes minimum-wage workers and bookkeepers have more in common than they know.

We acknowledge that this relationship between owners and workers creates the class system, and its impact on society, as Parenti explains it, is not one we question. We see much value, in fact, in showing students

from differing backgrounds how much more they have in common with each other than with the column-A people, who prosper from all our work. However, we believe that within this large category, stark differences exist that differentiate a working class from a middle class. We temper this common understanding of class, though, with the work of Michael Zweig. We feel it builds on Parenti through Zweig's understanding that class is related to access to power.

Zweig sees class as a system in which people are both connected to each other and made different from one another in the production of goods and services. Class extends itself into the "political and cultural dynamics of a society."<sup>9</sup> In attempting to distance his definition from others, he states,

Class is not a box we "fit" into, or not, depending on our own personal attributes. Classes are not isolated and self-contained. What class we are in depends upon the role we play, as it relates to what others do, in the complicated process in which goods and services are made. These roles carry with them different degrees of income and status, but their most fundamental feature is the different degrees of power each has.<sup>10</sup>

Autonomy, then—the level of our ability to control aspects of our lives, especially those involved with work—is a large determinant of our class standing.

Zweig is concerned with common misperceptions of class. He does not feel a person's job determines his or her class, using as an example the difference between a truck driver who owns his own rig and is, thus, a "small entrepreneur" within the middle class, and the truck driver in the working class who works for a freighting company. He further explains:

Images of the working class too closely identified with goods-producing blue collar workers miss the point. Only 21 percent of people [in the working class] are in goods-producing industries (mining, construction, and manufacturing). Over 70 percent of all private sector nonsupervisory employees hold white collar jobs in wholesale and retail trade, finance, insurance, and real estate, and a wide variety of business, personal, and health-related service industries.<sup>11</sup>

While he does not spend much time exploring the adjunct-labor system of academia, he does suggest that part-time college instructors, too, are part of the working class.

Zweig ultimately asserts that most people should not be considered middle class. He believes, as the title of his book states, that when seen through his definition, the majority of our country's population is working class—62 percent according to his calculations.<sup>12</sup> This division of

class views the middle class as a small managerial and professional group that is caught in between—and that has its access to power determined by—the “two great social forces of modern society, the working class and the capitalist class.”<sup>13</sup>

Class can also be associated with education, which is our focus with this collection. While understanding many dimensions of class that he later explains, Alfredo Lubrano conducted his research with the assertion that the “dividing line between working class and middle class” is education.<sup>14</sup> He knows other factors play into it, but he sees a person’s level of education as crucial. If true, this view validates Lynn Bloom’s assertion that the university is a “middle-class enterprise” that should work at changing working-class students into students with the values of the middle class and the aspiration to join it. While we find her claims a bit problematic for the very reasons Irvin Peckham asserts in *Going North Thinking West*, working-class students are perceived by what they lack in comparison to their middle- and upper-class counterparts. Carolyn R. Boiarsky, with Julie Hagemann and Judith Burdan, developed seven characteristics of working-class students that are informed by the “sociological, cultural, and psychological sites” they arrive from:

- They have grown up in families who earn less than the medium income earned by professional families.
- Their parents work in blue-/pink-collar or nonprofessional service jobs.
- They are first-generation college students.
- They exist in an authoritarian environment with little control over decisions related to their own lives. (Decisions related to work are made by management and decisions about their lifestyles are made by parents.)
- They live in a world governed by rules and procedures.
- They work at jobs rather than in careers, perceiving the job not as an end in and of itself but rather as a means to pay for their life outside work.
- They are often paid by the hour, with time becoming a measure of their worth.<sup>15</sup>

Although many variables complicate Boiarsky, Hagemann, and Burden’s characteristics, these features provide an overview of the influencing factors that shape working-class students. These factors lead to behaviors instructors see when they encounter working-class students in the writing classroom. One of these concerns is linguistic in nature. Basil Bernstein first posited the notion of “restricted” and “elaborate” codes regarding verbal expression. Bernstein associated working-class students

with restricted codes that did not translate well into the expectations of school.<sup>16</sup> Restricted codes rely on implied understandings among members with shared cultural backgrounds. Elaborate codes make no such assumptions and are, thus, more explicit. Middle- and upper-class students express themselves through elaborate codes.<sup>17</sup> Some of these features were verified by Annette Lareau's research on families from different class backgrounds.<sup>18</sup> So in terms of classroom behavior—what an instructor observes—differences attributable to class are seen, as working-class students are less explicit.

Research, from Bowles and Gintis to Anyon, also reminds us that working-class students have been educated in directive, mechanical ways while students from wealthier school districts have been allowed more creativity and are expected to engage materials in more critical ways. Bowles and Gintis suggest that schooling is meant to reproduce class divisions in our society, as working-class students learn to obey orders to succeed in the types of K–12 schools they are placed in.<sup>19</sup> Thus, working-class students enter our classrooms believing education is done to them, to use Ira Shor's words, not something they actively do.<sup>20</sup>

We also know exposure to reading marks the working-class student as different from those more privileged. Working-class homes often do not have as much reading material in them as middle-class or wealthier homes have. Working-class students do not see their parents reading as much. It has also been documented that working-class neighborhoods contain fewer libraries for children to visit. As a result, working-class students in college have not done much extended reading on their own and see reading as work. While they might have been read to as children—fairy tales or other such standard fare—reading is rarely an enjoyable activity to them as they get older. Furthermore, they might lack some traditional cultural references—the type E. D. Hirsch discussed thirty years ago—and are likely to have a more limited vocabulary.

Working-class students' purpose for education is an additional consideration for instructors. Linkon explains that the majority of working-class students do not intend to "becom[e] academics" even if they share a "cultural background" with other academics from a working-class background. For most working-class students, Linkon writes, academia is a means to an end, a better job.<sup>21</sup> Working-class students are extremely hard workers who want opportunities for socioeconomic mobility. Yet, they might also resist or sabotage both teaching and learning, as Shor has theorized, due to their estrangement from the academic project.

Society in general has much to learn about class. 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. Along the way, we also must see what working-class students can add to our understanding of teaching and to higher education in general.

We feel that composition studies' current scholarship regarding social class has not focused enough on the application of class understandings to first-year writing instruction. Some volumes have focused on the backgrounds of working-class academics. Some scholars have discussed the teaching of class theory to students. A few articles and books have outlined pedagogical practices that work toward emancipatory goals. *Class in the Composition Classroom* stands alongside such scholarship but contributes to the field in different ways. Given the variations in working-class populations and institutions of higher education across the nation, we do not offer chapters that merely give advice on what to do, as easy importation of a pedagogy from one group to another violates our pedagogical beliefs. Rather, this volume adopts an honest examination of what teachers are teaching to working-class student populations, as well as why certain theories should be implemented (or disregarded) given the particulars of any specific population.

We gave our contributors a draft of this introduction as a way to offer a lens through which they could discuss working-class students in their chapters. We desired that the contributors understand the underlying conceptions of class we find articulated in Parenti and Zweig, but we felt the issue in front of us was pedagogical, so we wanted them to concentrate on the particular features we outline from Boiarsky, Hagemann, and Burden and the others cited above. As we suggested earlier, though, attempts to define class feel confining, and some of our contributors resisted our interpretation (see especially the chapter by Marie-Roper and Edwards). Ultimately, though, our contributors fleshed out the experiences of working-class students in ways that illustrate the pedagogical issues on which we wanted to focus. We divided this book to allow for variations in our understanding of "working class" while highlighting real students in real situations concerning the teaching and learning of writing. The sum of the collection adds to the existing knowledge in important ways. We feel a working-class pedagogy must emerge in composition studies. We must respond to John Alberti's seminal article on second-tier institutions of higher learning. Tony Scott's research into the influence of adjunct labor, largely located in working-class institutions, must be accounted for. The collection in front of you, then, gives concrete evidence for what a working-class ethos can produce in terms of practice and scholarship. We can make a difference. Our contributors demonstrate this.

### **PART 1: THE WORKING-CLASS STUDENT: REGION, EDUCATION, AND CULTURE**

The first section examines a range of students' identities from home literacies to gender and sexual identities to access issues. This section highlights the diversity of students with working-class backgrounds or experiences while dovetailing pedagogy with students' voices. These stories illustrate previously unexplored definitions of working class while also celebrating and appreciating the wealth of knowledge working-class students bring with them into the classroom.

Aubrey Schiavone and Anna V. Knutson's chapter, "Pedagogy at the Crossroads: Intersections of Instructor and Student Identities across Institutional Contexts," explores the intersections of their identities and students' identities. With experience teaching working-class students at the University of New Mexico and Salisbury University in Maryland, respectively, before moving to the University of Michigan, where the population of working-class students was significantly less concentrated, Schiavone and Knutson affirm the importance of instructors' reflecting on the effects of their own pedagogies, as those pedagogies have been developed teaching different student populations.

"No Homo!: Toward an Intersection of Sexuality and Masculinity for Working-Class Men" by Robert Mundy and Harry Denny examines the experiences of working-class men at St. John's University and Pace University who must negotiate gender and sexual politics on the college campus. Through interviews with male students within the composition classroom, Mundy and Denny's research uncovered a theme they are calling "No Homo!" that illustrates the fragility of masculine identity. Mundy and Denny's research illustrates how the writing classroom affects and influences male students' perceptions of and beliefs about masculinity.

Aaron Barlow and Patrick Corbett, in "Implications of Redefining 'Working Class' in the Urban Composition Classroom," address the shifting definition of working class from socioeconomic to sociocultural. They explore the implications of this shift in a first-year composition classroom at New York City College of Technology (City Tech). The authors examine what it means to be working class in twenty-first-century Brooklyn, as well as how writing instructors are working to serve the working-class student population at City Tech, where traditional conceptions of working class cannot be applied to their student population.

Cassandra Dulin analyzes the California State University (CSU) system's Early Start program in "California Dreams: Working-Class Writers in the California State University System," exploring how this CSU programs affects working-class students at CSU Bakersfield and CSU

Stanislaus. Through on-site interviews with current writing program administrators and individual and statewide programmatic data analysis, Dulin shows how one of the largest university systems in the country is impacting working-class students.

Jacqueline Preston's "The Writing Space as Dialectical Space: Disrupting the Pedagogical Imperative to Prepare the 'Underprepared'" applies Kenneth Burke's work on identities to challenge the idea of the "underprepared" working-class student. Preston suggests FYW students are not as marginalized or underserved as many would like to believe; instead, they are individuals actively, purposefully, and meaningfully engaged in an ongoing and complex discursive process as they learn to engage and respond to the world around them.

Edie-Marie Roper and Mike Edwards investigate in "Changing Definitions of Work and Class in the Information Economy" how the use of digital tools, especially those associated with white-collar rather than blue-collar work, are affected by composition students' and instructors' self-awareness of class or lack thereof. The authors have direct experience with working-class living, one as a participant in the federal government's TRIO program for first-generation, low-income college students and the other as an enlisted United States Army soldier who benefitted from the GI Bill. They use interviews with Washington State University composition instructors and students to advocate for a new perspective to replace the older industrial-economy model of class that accounts for the economic value of digital work within the writing classroom.

## **PART 2: PEDAGOGY IN THE COMPOSITION CLASSROOM**

This section provides readers—instructors, teaching assistants, program directors, scholars, and others invested or interested in composition pedagogy and practice—with stories that illuminate the ways in which writing instructors develop classroom curriculum, practice, and strategies to support the working-class students in their classrooms, colleges, and universities. Our collaborators do not advocate for an easy importation of curriculum from one institution to another, but their essays provide insight into how pedagogical practices can be used to bolster students' identities, experiences, and needs.

In "Telling Our Story: 'College Writing' for Trade Unionists," Rebecca Fraser illustrates the importance of integrating fiction and nonfiction readings and writing assignments into course materials to help trade students write (and share) their own stories. Using her experiences teaching college writing at SUNY Empire State College,

Fraser suggests that trade-related readings inspire working-class students to recognize the job-specific intelligence they have while also celebrating their work lives. She suggests that trade union students need curriculum that encourages reflection upon and celebration of their identities, as it can move them beyond the stigmas they have about themselves.

In her chapter “Emotional Labor as Imposters: Working-Class Literacy Narratives and Academic Identities,” Nancy Mack explores pedagogical approaches to the memoir and literacy-narrative assignments. Mack suggests that these assignments encourage students to explore the challenges they face as their identities develop and change while also encouraging students to critique the emotional labor they invest within issues of literacy.

Liberty Kohn, in “We’re all Middle Class? Students’ Interpretation of Childhood Ethnographies to Reflect on Class Difference and Identity,” considers an argument and analysis essay he assigns in his Winona State University composition course in which students grapple with Annette Lareau’s ethnographic readings about working-class and middle-class children. His classroom research illustrates that students do not self-identify in easily patterned ways, further illustrating the difficulties in defining working-class culture.

Holly Middleton explores her “writing-as-advocacy” pedagogy and curriculum in “Pedagogies of Interdependence: Revising the Alienation Narrative for Cultural Match.” As an instructor at New Mexico Highlands University, an open-access, Hispanic-serving institution in northern New Mexico, Middleton asked her students to adopt the role of advocate, in which they were asked to read, write, and act on another’s behalf, bridging the “compassion gap” often existing between middle-class and working-class people. Trading advocacy roles, as well as applying theories to the classroom that teach students interdependence and independence, allows students to celebrate and respond to each other’s communities while also encouraging their agency as writers and citizens.

In “Never and Forever Just Keep Coming Back Again: Class, Access, and Student Writing Performance,” Missy Nieveen Phegley explores the intersection of technology, access, and students’ writing proficiency scores. Analyzing five years of data collected from Southeast Missouri State University (SMSU) students’ writing-proficiency scores at the end of Composition 1 and Composition 2, Phegley highlights the challenges working-class students face when writing with technology—particularly because many students do not have computers or the Internet at home.

**PART 3: WHAT OUR STUDENTS SAY**

Students' voices are a vital part of pedagogical inquiry. Without including them in our work, we cannot adequately refine our pedagogical practices, develop new curriculum, and impact programmatic policy. Therefore, in this section our contributors share their classroom and programmatic research as a means toward publicly sharing their students' voices. In addition, these essays offer thoughtful research questions writing instructors may want to adapt and explore within their own classrooms.

In "Social Economies of Literacy in Rural Oregon: Accounting for Diverse Sponsorship Histories of Working-Class Students in and out of School," Cori Brewster shares data collected from interviews conducted with rural, working-class students attending twelve Oregon two- and four-year colleges. Brewster's data illustrate that working-class students' literacy sponsorship opportunities vary drastically, and this reality means educators must adopt a more nuanced understanding of students' lives—where they have come from, where they envision going after college. The diversity of students' sponsorship also brings to bear broad implications for curriculum, assessment, pedagogy, and policy.

Brett Griffiths and Christie Toth explore the importance of understanding the relationships among poverty, class, and literacy learning for students in the two-year college setting in "Rethinking 'Class': Poverty, Pedagogy, and Two-Year College Writing Programs." Their article presents two case studies from radically different two-year college communities—one on the outskirts of Detroit and the other controlled by the Navajo Nation—to examine how poverty shapes the teaching practices within the composition classrooms at these two campuses.

According to James E. Romesburg in "Retrograde Movements and the Educational Encounter: Working-Class Adults in First-Year Composition," writing instructors who teach "mixed-generation" composition classes—nontraditional and traditional student populations—must challenge the ideological clichés that emerge from our youth-focused educational system. Romesburg shares his findings from quantitative and qualitative data gathered from three hundred first-year composition students and a range of their instructors at the Columbus University, a university that encompasses a large working-class and nontraditional student population. Ultimately, Romesburg calls for composition instructors to develop pedagogies, practices, and policies that decrease the friction between traditional and nontraditional students while increasing their collaboration and communication.

Genesea M. Carter, in "Being Part of Something Gave Me Purpose': How Community Membership Impacts First-Year Students' Sense of

Self,” explores how her English 101 Discourse Community Identity Profile can support working-class students’ transition to higher education by encouraging them to explore ways in which their discourse communities cultivate their identities. Using data collected from her English 101 section at the University of Wisconsin–Stout, a regional university and Wisconsin’s polytechnic, Carter analyzes her students’ profiles and accompanying reflections to highlight which communities her first-year, working-class students value and why they value them.

“Literacy Development as Social Practice in the Lives of Four Working-Class Women,” by Gail G. Verdi and Miriam Eisenstein Ebsworth, is an interview study of four working-class women who grew up and lived in the New York metropolitan area. Verdi and Ebsworth’s questions unpack the family literacy practices the women experienced growing up to discover how literacy practices in childhood can affect the success (or failure) of some working-class students.

We look at this collection of essays as a start of a broader conversation about the importance of valuing the class component of marginalized student populations. Much care must be incorporated into pedagogies and curricula so as to respond to our students’ identities and our students’ needs. The teaching of writing is difficult even among affluent populations. Our contributors have delved into the recesses of working-class pedagogies. Their struggles should inspire us all. We have no easy answers. But with this collection, we begin to form a concrete examination of the myriad factors influencing what we do as instructors of writing—and how our students perceive our efforts.

#### Notes

1. Linkon, *Teaching Working Class*, 6.
2. *Ibid.*, 6.
3. Weber, *Economy and Society*, 302.
4. Gouldner, *Future of Intellectuals*, 61.
5. Parenti, *Land of Idols*, 55.
6. *Ibid.*, 55.
7. *Ibid.*, 57.
8. *Ibid.*, 85–86.
9. Zweig, *Working Class Majority*, 11.
10. *Ibid.*, 11.
11. *Ibid.*, 31.
12. *Ibid.*, 30.
13. *Ibid.*, 20.
14. Lubrano, *Limbo: Blue-Collar Roots*, 3.
15. Boiarsky, ed., *Academic Literacy*, 12–13.
16. Bernstein, *Class, Codes and Control*, 146–47.

17. Trudgill, *Sociolinguistics*, 132–35.
18. Lareau, *Unequal Childhoods*.
19. Bowles and Gintis, *Schooling in Capitalist America*.
20. Shor, *Empowering Education*.
21. Linkon, *Teaching Working Class*, 2.

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