



**Genesea M. Carter and William H. Thelin, eds. *Class in the Composition Classroom: Pedagogy and the Working Class*. Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 2017. 363 pages. \$39.95 paperback.**

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## REVIEW ESSAYS



**Genesea M. Carter and William H. Thelin, eds. *Class in the Composition Classroom: Pedagogy and the Working Class*. Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 2017. 363 pages. \$39.95 paperback.**

I sit down to write this review at a fraught moment for talking about *class*, and especially the *working class*. On Facebook, many friends are discussing a recent Equality of Opportunity Project report that provides empirical support for the notion that racial disparity accounts for discrepancies in economic mobility, and *The New York Times* headline over an Op-Ed about the report reads, “An End to the Class vs. Race Debate.” In the meantime, we are in year two of a polarizing presidential administration wherein the identity marker “white working class” is a flashpoint for conversations and polemics focused on shifting electoral trends, the viability of a two-party system, and the increased visibility of nationalist movements. Despite a highly successful strike of West Virginia public school teachers that resulted in statewide wage and benefit increases and despite the fact that *Roseanne* briefly returned to the airwaves, 2018 is a complicated time to talk and teach “class.”

Enter *Class in the Composition Classroom: Pedagogy and the Working Class*, a new volume edited by Genesea M. Carter and William H. Thelin. Carter and Thelin seem to understand with a special acuity these complexities and dynamics. They wisely allow volume contributors to craft distinct, even idiosyncratic, representations of classrooms, student populations, and pedagogies, acknowledging that regional and institutional differences matter, for instance. The overarching project of the volume, as I see it, is to inquire (1) who are working-class writing and rhetoric students, (2) how might we best develop pedagogies to serve them, and (3) what’s at stake in naming student populations and pedagogies “working class”?

In their introduction, Carter and Thelin review literature with clarity and focus, emphasizing that “class” and “working class” are not monolithic. For all the literature the field has amassed on the subject, we have not interrogated who working-class students are and how we ought to teach them, they write. Carter and Thelin point out how much literature has instead focused on the class backgrounds of teachers and the emancipatory potential of teaching *about* class: “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.” Ultimately, “We feel a working-class pedagogy must emerge” (9). The fact that they use the singular “pedagogy” is misleading because contributors suggest multiple pedagogies informed by local needs and dynamics. At the risk of picking nits, I wish Carter and Thelin had framed their argument in the plural: “working-class *pedagogies* must emerge.”

Relatedly, Carter and Thelin do not explicitly discuss the imperative for intersectional analyses of class. To be sure, their contributors frequently *do* explore how race and ethnicity, sexuality and gender identity, *and* class have profound impacts on how our students access cultural capital and experience institutions. Part of me would have liked to hear Carter and Thelin comment more on these intersections while theorizing the book’s key terms and concepts and making the important point about gaps in the literature. But I can recognize that it is perhaps a more useful strategy to let contributors’ voices speak most loudly.

The book's first section, "The Working-Class Student's Region, Education, and Culture," is perhaps the strongest in terms of challenging readers with varied representations of who contemporary working-class students are and what cultural affinities and literate practices they bring to class. Aubrey Schiavone and Anna V. Knutson describe how teaching at multiple institutions with varying levels of prestige and privilege have afforded opportunities for them to reflect on their own subject positions and analyze shifting attitudes toward education and culture, as embodied in student writing. They found their comfort (at disclosing details about their backgrounds) shifting as they moved among types of institutions, and they also found that themes like "exceptionalism" resonated differently in student writing across institution type. Their data bears close examination by those interested not only in considering how best to serve working-class students, but also those interested in teacher disclosure.

Aaron Barlow and Patrick Corbett argue that academic "arrogance" has alienated urban working-class students (among whom multilingualism is frequently the norm) and maintained a deficit-based understanding of who working-class students are. Barlow and Corbett helpfully call for a precise and realistic examination of student "subjectivities" as a path for understanding our working-class students. They write, "We must understand our urban working-class students beyond rigid socioeconomic and sociocultural definitions that reify the working class as an economic and social marker of identity," going on to posit a flexible pedagogy informed by a renewed understanding of Ira Shor's work from the 1980s and 1990s (61). In their rejection of economic and cultural conceptions of class, it's sometimes unclear what their definition of *working class* is, but they offer perhaps the most useful polemic in the entire text in favor of rooting our working-class pedagogies in the material lives of our students. Cassandra Dulin, similarly, critiques the California State University system for implying a false equivalency between "remedial" and "working class" and critiques well-intentioned bridge programs that don't always account for complexities of work lives of diverse student bodies. Edie-Marie Roper and Mike Edwards connect "class" concerns to both the information economy and the information age's tools that are commonly used in our writing classrooms. Roper and Edwards make the provocative assertion that given the "overdetermined" ways that markers like "class" often circulate in these contexts, perhaps *working class* is not a useful marker (compared to, say, the more precise "first-generation college student").

The second section, "Pedagogy in the Composition Classroom," will be of special interest to writing teachers at open-admissions institutions and other schools with significant working-class populations. Make no mistake, though, contributors transcend lore and engage theory-building and/or empirical methodologies. Like the book's first section, these contributions similarly root their ideas in local conditions and local dynamics. Rebecca Fraser, for instance, theorizes an emerging "labor literacy" among trade union members who engage in critical storytelling at the Harry Van Arsdale Jr. Center for Labor Studies at SUNY Empire State College. The program Fraser describes combines a humanistic-liberal curriculum, an exploration of work-as-generative-theme, and a foregrounding of analytic frames applied to student narratives about their own "work lives." And Nancy Mack takes a canonical first-year composition assignment (the literacy narrative) and theorizes how working-class students can use a sequence of guided writing activities leading toward the narrative as occasions for interrogating the emotional labor they often must perform while engaged in "academic identity formation" (140). Mack offers usable ideas while also problematizing the literacy narrative genre, and both her pedagogical interventions and her

critiques are valuable contributions to ongoing conversations regarding the literacy narrative's ethical complexities.

Liberty Kohn shares results of a study of student writing about working-class ethnographies and looks at how students negotiate paradoxes like acknowledging root causes of economic inequality while rehearsing bootstraps myths. Kohn's findings also reveal the similarly complex and sometimes paradoxical ways students disclose their own social class identities, challenging pat characterizations of our notions of working-class student bodies. Kohn's chapter nicely illustrates a strength of the "Pedagogy" section of the anthology—the value the book places on moving beyond teaching ideas and moving toward complicated, theoretically and empirically rich inquiries into how our discipline might most productively "teach class."

The book's third and final section uniquely foregrounds student voices. "What Our Students Say" gathers five methodologically diverse studies of working-class students. Cori Brewster extends research in literacy sponsorship and rural literacies by looking closely at seven "students differently positioned within and across small communities and in relation to family, school, employers, social institutions, and the state," using an expansive notion of what constitutes literate practices and considering carefully how both diverse contexts and intersectional identity markers impact attitudes toward those practices (226–27). Brewster offers compelling theorizing of how these seven case studies might impact how we enact more transparent and transferable pedagogies in working-class contexts. Brett Griffiths and Christie Toth are also mindful of *place*, looking at what they call "poverty effects" on working-poor and working-class students at two-year colleges in an urban context in Michigan and a tribal context on the Navajo Nation. Like Brewster, Griffiths and Toth look at their subjects deeply and consider the dearth of institutional and programmatic systems for engaging poverty effects that impact teaching and learning in the profound and specific ways they describe.

This third section highlights one of the book's abiding and sustained interests: the metaphors we use when describing the acquisition of academic literacies, or what we talk about when we talk about working-class students acquiring the language of the academy. Contributors assume the existence and the value of both the "home languages" and the discourse communities in which various working-class students might already have membership. Furthermore, contributors discuss, in metacognitive and self-aware ways, how academe (and the field of writing studies) ought to consider "bridging" to a new place or the "addition" of a new set of tools. These metaphors aren't new. But I'm thrilled to see the empirical rigor applied to the rhetoric of academics and in particular to students.

How does the text hold together as a coherent whole? Although I appreciate how Carter and Thelin allow individual contributors to move in many different directions, I would have also appreciated some brief contextualizing statements before each of the book's three sections, identifying threads and unifying themes. Occasionally, contributors do some of this connecting themselves, referring back to the book's smart introduction, but even a concise paragraph at the start of a given section of the text and in the editors' own voices could have gone a long way toward making more explicit for readers how we might consider the diverse ideas presented therein. There are also a few odd organization choices, like including in the "Pedagogy" section an analysis of how large-scale writing assessment practices and technology initiatives impact access and success among working-class students. But these are minor quibbles. As someone who has long been interested in issues of social class and who teaches at a campus serving large numbers of working-class undergraduates, I welcome the contributions of *Class in the Composition*

*Classroom*. As James T. Zebroski suggests in the book's afterword, the collection's unapologetic focus on the intersection of class and first-year composition is a distinguishing feature. By extension, the foregrounding of student voices and subjectivities and backgrounding of the perspectives of "working-class academics"—about which there already is a good deal of scholarly literature—signals new directions for scholarship. I look forward to watching many of these valuable conversations—particularly those focused on issues of representation in literacy narratives, teacher and student self-disclosure, emotional labor, and how programs might contend with "poverty effects"—continue to unfold. I'm grateful that Carter and Thelin have assembled these voices and nudged the conversation in these new directions.

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