



William H. Thelin, Genesea M. Carter, eds. *Class in the Composition Classroom: Pedagogy and the Working Class*. Boulder: [Utah State University Press](#), 2017. 370 pp. \$39.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-60732-617-5.

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Class and Composition

In *Class in the Composition Classroom: Pedagogy and the Working Class*, edited by William H. Thelin and Genesea M. Carter, contributors explore the myriad ways that working-class students can be better supported in the college composition classroom. The essays included draw from research and experience to support an overall critique of the historical and institutional practices prevalent in this widely taken course, as well as a critique of the elitist culture and pedagogy in university English departments.

Approaching this topic from many angles, the book begins with essays that seek to define (and redefine) what we mean by “working class.” Part 1, called “The Working-Class Student’s Region, Education, and Culture,” is as fruitful as it is complicated, and it approaches the concept of the working class from a modern, multifaceted perspective, featuring diverse voices of the working-class population enrolled in college composition today, as well as many narratives from the perspectives of composition professors who identify as working class. The essays in the first section also acknowledge the diversity and intersectionality of identity of working-class students, considering gender, sexuality, race, and geography as factors that also contribute to the overall experience working-class students have in the institution. This builds a much broader understanding of “working class” in the early twenty-first century, representing a growing contingent of workers in many fields.

Edie-Marie Roper and Mike Edwards explain that this identity shift is largely due to the move from an industrial economy to the contemporary information economy, wherein “those who can buy or invest in technology will get richer, while those who must sell their labor will get poorer” (p. 109). This understanding is critical to the way we approach composition instruction, because under late capitalism in the United States, literacy and class are fused: “A worker’s possibilities are contained by his ability to negotiate subjects of capital” (p. 110). This resonates with the results of the study conducted by Aubrey Schiavone and Anna V. Knutson, who found through various interviews that working-class students tend to choose colleges based on geographic or economic necessity, rather than a sense of prestige and/or family legacy, which are cited more often by middle-class students (p. 34). Furthermore, they found that working-class students were more likely to choose a major based on “professionalization” along a specific career path, compared to middle-class students’ responses about “intellectual ‘interest’ or ‘fascination’” regarding the subject matter (p. 37).

Therefore, it is imperative that composition instructors consider *why* and *how* working-class students end up in our classrooms in the first place. In the introduction, Thelin and Carter note 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” (p. 8). While this may not always represent the educational experiences of working-class kids, it is important for composition instructors to

understand students' educational histories. Thelin and Carter mention Ira Shor (*Empowering Education*, 2012), who said that often, "working-class students enter our classrooms believing education is done to them, ... not something they actively do" (quoted, p. 8).

To respond to these realities, many researchers emphasize the value of narrative writing tasks, particularly for working-class students. This goes against the overall shift toward argumentative writing in American high school and composition classrooms that has occurred over the past few decades. Schiavone and Knutson state that "narrative assignments allow working-class students to make sense of the identity marker of *working class* itself" (p. 21). This is a welcome change in the format of many composition courses, which Jacqueline Preston contends often "neglect to create a space in which the biographies, experiences, and well-developed literacies students bring with them to the classroom are valued" (p. 89). This is not a rejection of the argumentative mode, but instead a push to provide students with the tools to blend the modes of writing. In other words, teaching writing in terms of isolated "modes" minimizes students' potential for experimentation and creativity.

Likewise, Aaron Barlow and Patrick Corbett cite the negative aspects of limiting *instructors'* ability to be creative through institutional policies, such as "teacher proofing," which limits the autonomy of individual teachers with the goal of creating a more controlled experience across different class sections. This usually involves "increased curricular control and pacing, high-stakes testing, standardized course content, and rote instruction" and ultimately "sees the teachers not as people who have their own individual subjectivities but as assembly-line workers" (p. 64). Of course, one could argue that this occurs even more regularly with younger students in the public education system and represents a continuation of the "mechanical" ways working-class students are often taught, mentioned earlier. Barlow and Corbett also argue that teachers and students are the most successful when goals are developed based on the starting point of each individual student, rather than from "assessment or external oversight and goal setting" that is dictated by the institution (p. 64). Their essay, "Redefining 'Working-Class' in the Urban Composition Classroom" is a particularly good resource for ways to design inclusive and generative classrooms for working-class students, with suggestions such as keeping syllabi more general to allow for flexibility, allowing minor changes to due dates in response to student work schedules, and providing opportunities for students to develop writing topics through a process of exploration. Above all, Barlow and Corbett assert that "we must make the individuals in each group of students the heart of each semester" (p. 76).

In part 2, "Pedagogy in the Composition Classroom," contributors provide further resources so writing instructors can develop curriculum and utilize strategies to best support working-class students. Critical to many arguments here is the concept of academic language and culture as potentially exclusive factors in composition classrooms. In her essay, "Emotional Labor as Imposters," Nancy Mack states, "unless I address how learning academic language can make working-class students feel like imposters or traitors, I am denying the social injustice embedded in my job as a writing teacher" (p. 140). Mack emphasizes that many working-class students already feel like imposters in an academic setting and therefore must work against this, through some emotional labor, toward a sense of self-efficacy. To define self-efficacy, Mack uses a definition developed by cognitive psychologists Albert Bandura and Frank Pajares: "believing in advance that one is competent to achieve a given task" (p. 150). Rebecca Fraser, who writes about her work as a composition instructor for trade unionists at the Harry Van Arsdale Jr. Center for Labor Studies at SUNY Empire State College, addresses these tensions in part by asking her students to create a "primer of words" in which they define job-specific terms related to the industries in which they work—an activity where the students are the experts and the teacher is the learner. This corresponds with the concepts of individualizing instruction and valuing the prior knowledge students bring to the classroom.

Mack also explains the importance of metacognitive reflection activities so students can identify which writing strategies work well and also understand that writing is a problem-solving process, as opposed to a skill one either possesses or doesn't: "Writers don't have to complete the task stress-free; they just need to know they have or can locate the resources that will help them do so" (p. 151). The development of students' self-efficacy is again tied to their engagement with critical narrative writing tasks, which Mack says "will hopefully

grant students agency in how they decide to author their futures” (p. 143). Liberty Kohn’s study later in the section found that students who might otherwise be considered working class may not identify as such, even after reading Annette Lareau’s ethnographies (as the students did for Kohn’s course) and discussing representations of class. However, Kohn clarifies that this is not a result of the students’ own self-delusion, but rather an indication that many “working-class students appear to construct a childhood and college identity with greater fluidity than their working-class background suggests” (p. 165). Thus, Kohn’s students’ narratives worked against the strict delineation of class and instead suggested that “many people, through a powerful, often conflicting mix of personal history, hope, and imagination, are a little bit working class and a little bit middle class” (p. 176). Through concerted study and self-reflective narrative, students can become more thoughtful about their own specific and multifaceted identities.

Of course, teachers who weave narrative writing into their class activities are in turn more cognizant of their students’ backgrounds and identities. Holly Middleton refers to Amy Roubillard’s argument that “we need pedagogies for working-class students that engage memory and ambition,” and she frames the writing classroom as a place where students’ cultural histories are valued, rather than a place where (middle-class) values are imposed upon the students (p. 183). Middleton describes her experience teaching at New Mexico Highlands University, an open-admissions federally designated Hispanic-serving institution, where she developed what she calls “pedagogies of interdependence.” Middleton believed this was more in line with the culture of her Latinx students, who usually come from very interdependent families and communities—a “cultural mismatch” with university culture’s emphasis on independence (p. 181). In Middleton’s course, titled “Writing as Advocacy,” students composed essays that advocated for individuals and groups from their own communities who needed help, and then sent those essays to appropriate organizations and/or representatives. This demonstrates another salient point many contributors make: when young writers conceive of their writing as both authentic and useful, they are more likely to become stronger, more thoughtful writers.

One of the most refreshing aspects of *Class in the Composition Classroom* is the presence of many student voices, which is particularly emphasized in part 3, “What Our Students Say.” Throughout this portion of the book, students and their instructors provide examples of the lived realities of students who experience chronic or episodic poverty. Many contributors assert that we must break down many of the institutional structures currently in place regarding composition classes in order to achieve better student outcomes. This means, of course, appropriate responses at the institutional level as to how instructors might address the multidimensional challenges faced by many working-class students. Brett Griffiths and Christine Toth examine this with respect to two-year college writing programs, but their overall conclusion could apply to the composition programming at any college or university: “instructors must be theoretically, programmatically, and institutionally equipped to address material circumstances that obstruct literacy learning” (p. 256).

In some respects, this goes against the push for more instructor autonomy discussed earlier and instead supports a more programmatic approach, particularly when instructors are misinformed or unsure about how to address poverty at the pedagogical level. For instance, after interviewing fellow composition instructors, Griffiths and Toth found “persistent ideological tensions in instructors’ responses, particularly among their empathy for the poverty-related barriers students encountered, the value they attached to student agency, and their perceived obligation to uphold what they considered college-level ‘standards’” (p. 240). These contrasting ideas within the book demonstrate that a revolution of composition pedagogy is only possible when change occurs at every level of the university—when both administrators and instructors collaborate to better support working-class students. This approach would also work to improve faculty retention, as a few instructors interviewed cited “‘burnout’ and a lack of institutional support” as their main reasons for ultimately leaving their positions (p. 249).

A key step from an instructional standpoint is reconsidering how historical values of academia are delivered to students, where “narratives about education and social uplift tend to obscure many of the lived realities of students experiencing poverty” (p. 231). In other words, delivering “bootstraps theory” to a group of young adults is flawed and potentially

damaging, and even more so when the students come from vulnerable populations. This can also be addressed at the institutional level, where the university must determine the best route for success for its specific student population. Middleton cites Nicole Stephens et al. ("Unseen Disadvantage," 2012), who propose shifting the institutional practices to fit the students rather than aiming to assimilate the students into the academy—a practice that ignores class differences. Many studies have determined that the achievement gap between middle-class (often continuing-generation) and working-class (often first-generation) students is "a product of the predominantly middle-class cultural norms of independence that are institutionalized in many American colleges and universities" (p. 182).

This collection is important and timely in that it asks composition instructors, and the universities and institutions that employ these instructors, to reconsider the purpose of composition class for working-class students. It reaffirms the significance of this course, despite elitist attitudes throughout much of academia that composition should be phased out. Notably, the book criticizes the overall culture of academia, which privileges middle- and upper-class students and strives for standardization. While many contributors chart a path toward a pedagogy that works for working-class students, the overwhelming message is that this path must become more individualized on every level. This begins with more individualized, authentic instruction in the composition classroom, but also expands to the institutional level, where administrators must both adopt a subjective approach to addressing the challenges of their particular student population and devise ways to better support their composition instructors in and out of the classroom. In short, this book is an essential resource containing diverse voices, cutting-edge pedagogy, and calls for radical change in the way college composition is taught in America.



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