Working Class Student Definition

We cannot speak of a “working class” in American life or among student populations without understanding the underlying class system. 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, or the “cultural capital” they might wield, as Alvin Gouldner first suggested. 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. 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.” 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.

Column B, he explains, contains the other 98 percent of humanity “who live principally off wages, salaries, bonuses, fees, commissions, and pensions.” 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.

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.” 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. 10

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. 11

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. 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.”

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. 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.

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. 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. Some of these features were verified by Annette Lareau’s research on families from different class backgrounds. 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. Thus, working-class students enter our classrooms believing education is done to them, to use Ira Shor’s words, not something they actively do.
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. 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.