

## Review:

### ***Class in the Composition Classroom: Pedagogy and the Working Class,* Eds. Genesea M. Carter and William H. Thelin**

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**T**he field of working-class studies is particularly relevant in these times, when access to equitable education is under fire. With regard to race, Nikole Hannah-Jones's (2016) essay in the *New York Times Magazine* raised our awareness regarding the institutionalized segregation that cripples our New York City schools. At the same time, scholars like Sherry Linkon (1999), author of *Teaching Working-Class*, are changing the way we think about working-class students in academia. Now is the perfect time for *Class in the Composition Classroom: Pedagogy and the Working Class* to arrive on the scene. It is the first edited collection to take on class in the writing classroom as its central project and allow the voices of working-class students to be its primary chorus. For these reasons, this important book, edited by Genesea M. Carter and William H. Thelin, will become a foundational text for both scholars and practitioners in the field of working-class writing studies.

In their introduction, Carter and Thelin (2017) take issue with Lynn Z. Bloom's (1996) view of first-year writing; Bloom argues that "as middle-class teachers of college composition, our courses are saturated with middle-class values, no matter what theories, pedagogical philosophies, or content we embrace" (658). The problem with this assumption—according to Carter and Thelin—is that "working-class students are perceived by what they lack in comparison to their middle and upper-class counterparts" (2017, 7). In contrast, the central premise of this collection is that working-class students and their voices can and should influence our specific assignments, our broader pedagogies, our service projects, and even the structure of our institutions. Carter and Thelin want to move class considerations to the center of our discussions of teaching and writing: "We feel that composition studies' current scholarship regarding social class has not yet focused enough on the application of class understandings to first year writing instruction" (9). Their project is one of empowerment, advocacy, and informed pedagogy, and their deep commitment to equitable education is truly an inspiration. Their contributors are equally committed and inspiring.

The seventeen chapters are divided into three parts. Part 1: "The Working-Class Student's Region, Education, and Culture" provides a useful analysis and discussion of the diversities within working-class culture. One of the primary tensions throughout the text is the difficulty of defining the term "working class," since some students are unwilling to claim that descriptor, and others are more at home with the term "first-generation." Cassandra Dulin's chapter provides a thoughtful analysis of the California State University system's Early Start program, a state-mandated program that takes different forms at each California campus. While these programs are designed to provide an introduction to the skills students will need as undergraduates, through her interviews, Dunn found that students were frustrated when they realized this time would not translate into credit for graduation:

If they get into a program, in some cases at major personal expense, they want to see how it has helped them in some way ... Their frustration might begin when they realize the two weeks they have just dedicated to the Early Start program didn't get

them any closer to their goal of finishing the required college-level writing courses (84).

As Dunn says, we need to “conceptualize a working-class pedagogy that supports those who are not necessarily ready for college and those who require a different way of thinking about student needs” (78). Jacqueline Preston’s chapter puts that call into action; she developed a working-class pedagogy she calls “a pedagogy of assemblage,” in which students design projects that draw on their “histories, beliefs, and experiences” to meet the needs of a particular audience. This moves writing away from an emphasis on correctness and “toward relevancy” (99). Thus, both Dunn and Preston highlight in microcosm what this book, as a whole, asks scholars and educators to do: rethink their approaches to the classroom and interrogate methods that assume every student has the resources and support to be successful.

Part II: “Pedagogy in the Classroom” reinforces this interrogation of class-based assumptions powerfully through student interviews, narratives, and essays. In her chapter “Telling Our Story,” Rebecca Fraser describes teaching at the Harry Van Arsdale Jr. Center for Labor Studies at SUNY, “one of the few liberal arts college programs that exist solely for trade unionists in the United States” (127). The college writing classes Fraser directs have two required texts: *The Things They Carried* by Tim O’Brien and *Labor Writes*, the “annual anthology of student writing and art” (128). By using student narratives as one of the primary texts in the course, Fraser puts student experiences, reflections, and stories at the center of class discussion:

Placing a student essay alongside a story by Tim O’Brien gives students the experience of being emancipated in the ways that Ranciere talks about; students have a voice of authority in our college classrooms because who knows better than they do what it is like to be an apprentice in the trades? (138).

The chapters in this section highlight the importance of student voices through literacy narratives (Mack), ethnography (Kohn), and advocacy (Middleton). In her chapter, Missy Neiveen Phegley describes how technology can form a barrier for some working-class

students who lack the experience and access to complete assignments and participate in technology-based pedagogies. This section extends the importance of pedagogy that brings students' needs, and their voices, to the center of our instructional practices. These contributors make the case that we can become more effective writing instructors when we have a deep understanding of our students' lived experiences, and then allow those student voices to influence our approach to the classroom.

The last section, Part III, appropriately titled "What Our Students Say," presents research in the field that centers on student interviews, essays, and experiences. Once again, this approach allows the working-class student body to create their own agenda and direct the scope of their findings. These chapters highlight how working-class experiences impact two-year colleges (Griffiths and Toth), non-traditional students (Romesburg), discourse communities (Carter), and working-class women (Verdi and Eisenstein Ebsworth). Brett Griffiths and Christie Toth provide a moving account of teaching and learning at two-year colleges, where they found that "faculty face what we describe as *routine crises* of poverty effects on their composition classrooms" (232). Their work brings to the surface what many of us know from our own experiences in the classroom: many students face insurmountable challenges of homelessness, lack of mobility, and even hunger, and these problems, while often seen as too private to mention in public, prevent many students from reaching their educational goals. Griffiths and Toth recognize the many heroic efforts of writing instructors to address their students' needs, and yet these instructors are often overtaxed and underemployed as it is. Instead, the authors call for more widespread, institutional response to these crises of poverty: "These findings suggest that two-year colleges—and other access-oriented institutions where students experience routine poverty-related crises—should consider developing program-level responses to these conditions" (232). As the demographics of our student populations change, this call might well be applied to all institutions of higher learning.

This collection is certainly an important addition to the field of working-class studies, as well as composition, but more than that: it was such a pleasure to read, including James T. Zebroski's lovely

afterword, again focused on the importance of stories as a means to better understand working-class composition. The contributors create a seamless thread of passionate advocacy, and that passion is evident in their research and thoughtful pedagogies. Good research does not always produce good writing, and yet, this collection moves working-class research to a new level, while simultaneously showcasing the stories that move us all to be the best we can, in the classroom and beyond.

## REFERENCES

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