



**Carter, G. M. & Thelin, W. H. (Eds.). (2017). *Class in the composition classroom: Pedagogy and the working class*. Louisville: Utah State University Press.**

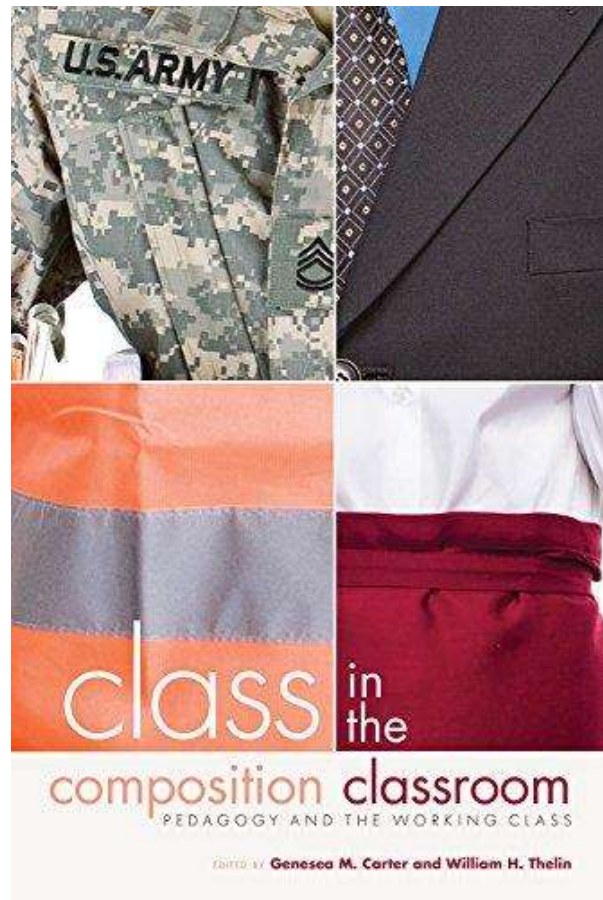
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The term “working class” is one that has long been debated, with people of all class identities arguing what it does and does not mean to be “working class.” It is an identity that is embraced by some and shunned by others, and seemingly misunderstood by most. As noted by Draut (2018), the three common methods used by social scientists to determine the definition of “working class” are occupation, income, and education. These three standards can regularly fluctuate and no one can agree which is the “right” method to use. In *Class in the Composition Classroom*, Genesee M. Carter, William H. Thelin, and their colleagues, much like social scientists, do not agree on a definition for “working class.” Despite this, they do take seriously the various understandings of working-class identities and realities, with regard to education, and the ways these things affect students, classrooms, and writing pedagogy. They encourage readers to do the same.

It is this ambiguity of definition and the impact of this identity on students and composition instructors that is the driving



force behind this book. The authors' goal is to resist "outdated characterizations of these students as underprepared" and to challenge first year writing instructors to rid their programs of the "one-size-fits all pedagogical approach" in favor of curricula that "give voice to students' lived experiences" (back cover). Though the contributors use various definitions of what it means to be working class, the collection comes together to focus on a singular argument: the need for a working-class pedagogy in composition studies.

This argument is made over the course of three sections: 1) The Working-Class Student: Region, Education, and Culture; 2) Pedagogy in the Composition Classroom; and 3) What Our Students Say. In each section, contributors present evidence for the ways working-class students are often misperceived, the importance of the types of experience and knowledge these students bring to the classroom, and the pressing need for a pedagogy that reaches beyond the standard middle-class experience and expectation.

### **The Working-Class Student**

Basic to this collection is an understanding of what it means for students to be working-class. As such, the first third of the book devotes ample space to highlighting the wide range of identities, literacies, and experiences of working-class students to "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" (p. 10). Before asking readers to expand their views of working-class students, instructors are asked to challenge their own sense of class and identity. Chapter 1 argues that an instructor's own identity influences both their relationships with their students and the pedagogy they employ for various student populations. This chapter sets the expectation for instructors and writing program directors to spend time reflecting on not only their

individual identities but also the identities and assumptions of their courses and programs and the ways these shape curricula. It provides a solid foundation for readers as they think about the diversity of student identities discussed in the remainder of the section.

The five remaining chapters in the first section explore working-class identities in terms of sexuality, masculinity, community discourse, access, language, culture, income, and work. While each chapter focuses on experiences in specific schools with specific students, three important practices for all composition instructors emerge and are successfully threaded through each chapter: 1) meet students where they are, 2) connect to students' prior knowledge, and 3) learn to understand the value of the working-class experience for the overall classroom experience. Scholars of teaching and learning have long maintained that effective teachers get to know their students so they can identify where students are in life. Effective teachers are able to connect new material to prior knowledge, thereby increasing the likelihood of the material "sticking" as it takes root in information with which students are already familiar. The contributors in this section expand on that premise by arguing that, perhaps more explicitly than middle-class students, working-class student knowledge is made up of the various identities these students hold.

The chapters in the first section make clear the reason this argument is so important. Many working-class students come from backgrounds and communities where reading and writing serve specific work-related purposes and reading and writing for fun or recreation is uncommon because of life demands. Contributors highlight the obligations and restrictions most working-class students face in addition to school: family, home responsibilities, work, lack of access, and resources. Because these students have "real life" concerns that many traditional middle-class students do not have, their need

to understand the immediate value and benefit of composition courses is increased. That, the authors of these chapters argue, is one of the biggest reasons composition pedagogy needs to change. When instructors understand their students' situations and experiences outside of the classroom, they are better able to create a pedagogy that meets this student population where they are and to provide assignment and instruction that is truly beneficial to the working-class student. Beyond that, contributors argue, this will help move composition programs beyond the idea that working-class students are underprepared, and therefore remedial or not useful to the class. As such, said programs might identify the importance of the working-class student's background, experience, and the ways those things can enhance all student learning.

Overall, this section provides an important look at many of the influences affecting working-class students and their education, and provides readers with a solid understanding of why they should seriously consider the pedagogies and practices presented in the next section.

### **Pedagogy in First Year Writing**

Once composition instructors gain a better understanding of the various identities and potential contributions of their working-class students, they are faced with the daunting task of rethinking, revising, and restructuring their current practices. Having been faced with the same challenge, the contributors to *Class in the Composition Classroom* understand that struggle. The second section offers insight into how changes have been made and implemented at various institutions. These stories are offered not as a how-to but as a guide to help those in composition instruction see various ways “pedagogical practices can be used to bolster students' identities, experiences, and needs” (p. 11). The stories encourage instructors to think critically about how they can revise their own curriculum and assignments to meet the needs of their students.

The first contributor, Rebecca Fraser, demonstrates “meeting students where they are” as she discusses the importance of utilizing fiction and nonfiction assignments – both reading and writing – to help students who are trade laborers and apprentices recognize the specialized intelligence and skills they possess and to help them share their stories. Other contributors demonstrate this idea of meeting students where they are, coupled with building on prior knowledge, as they explore how they have adjusted and used literacy narratives, memoir writing, and readings about issues of class with their students. These strategies help students not only explore their changing identities and the ensuing challenges but to also help them, as instructors, understand how students see themselves. Through such assignments students are able to establish their identities and voices in classrooms and institutions where they, as working-class students, don't always feel they belong.

The exploration of “writing-as-advocacy” assignments highlights how such assignments help students learn about other communities and perspectives. Furthermore, it demonstrates how reading, writing, and acting on behalf of others helps bridge “the ‘compassion gap’ often existing between middle-class and working-class people” (p. 12). The assignment develops community in the classroom while allowing students to see the value and benefit of reading and writing beyond school walls. The final chapter in the section provides a crucial look at the challenges many working-class students face regarding technology. Since many have limited or no access, their ability to write and perform in the ways expected in first year composition programs is hindered. This chapter challenges the notion that such students are lacking skills or are in need of remediation. The authors assert that perhaps a change in how instructors teach or require assignments will reveal that students with less access to technology and information can, in fact, perform at the same

level as students who have grown up with and become savvy in the ways of technology and navigating information.

All in all, the second section provides an impressive look at the ways in which instructors adjusted their pedagogy to the benefit of their students, which then benefits the classes, programs, and communities of which they are a part. This look at pedagogical approaches geared more toward working-class student experiences leads directly to the experiences of students, in their own words, found in the section three.

### **Student Voices**

Before diving in to rethink pedagogy and practice, it is important for composition instructors to hear student experiences and expectations. Without these, the temptation is to maintain the same old middle-class-focused ways that have been engrained in academia for as long as most can remember. The essays in this final section offer information gleaned from various research efforts concerning the experiences of students in first year composition classrooms and programs. Many contributors also provide readers with research questions for potential use in their own classrooms.

As with the earlier sections, the authors of in this section make clear the importance of knowing about students' experience, knowledge, and values. One of the chapters explicitly explores the ways poverty affects composition classrooms and student success. The contributors of this chapter urge composition instructors to understand how the immediate need to work to provide for their family, or the lack of a solid support system, childcare, transportation, or technology will have a direct impact on whether a student attends class and completes assignments. They argue that composition programs, particularly those that serve student populations in impoverished areas, need to develop policies that take material conditions

into account rather than leaving students, and instructors, floundering and often failing.

Still other contributors argue that it is not enough to know where students come from; instructors must also know where the students want to go. This knowledge can help educators shape practice to help their working-class students see the value of the course outside of being a requirement, thereby allowing students to develop literacy practices that are in keeping with the values and identities they each hold. Another contributor adds to this line of thought by exploring the challenges of teaching composition classes made up of both traditional and nontraditional students. He encourages instructors to better understand their students so they can better create pedagogies and practices that draw on the values of both groups while effectively affirming and utilizing the knowledge nontraditional students bring to the classroom.

Throughout this section, the importance of seeing life from students' perspectives is argued strongly, as is the case for adjusting pedagogy to fit the student rather than forcing the student to fit the pedagogy. Not only that, the case for valuing and affirming students' original communities to help them find their agency and place in academia is well made. The book, and this section in particular, encourages composition instructors to remember that "literacy curricula for all learners, irrespective of social class, must be both creative and critical and must foster connections between reading and writing across student differences in a learning community built on collaboration and cooperation" (p. 318). It is this mindset and the resulting policy and pedagogy changes that will enable composition instructors to prepare their students for communication in all aspects of their lives.

### **Conclusion**

In this volume, Carter, Thelin and their colleagues have provided a compelling case for the changes needed in writing programs and

culture. They demonstrated the necessary changes for composition programs to serve working-class student populations effectively and the benefits such changes bring to students, classrooms, and programs. This is particularly important because composition and English programs are viewed by many as irrelevant and unwelcoming, even though the

education writing courses provide is fundamental for life both in and outside of the university setting. *Class in the Composition Classroom* provides an excellent introduction to the needs of working-class students and to the ways composition instructors can begin to think about how to adjust their pedagogies and practices to best serve their students.

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## References

Draut, T. (2018). Defining the working class. *Demos: An Equal Say and Equal Chance for All*. Retrieved from <http://www.demos.org/publication/understanding-working-class>


## About the Reviewer

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## Education Review

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